

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

ZETA MAJOR



SIMON MESSINGHAM



'You've decided to concentrate on deriving energy from the kinetic force of planetary movement...'

A glib remark from the Doctor to a desperate scientist has had far-reaching effects on the empire of Morestra. Eminent Morestran scientist Sorenson, attempting to find a new power source for his planet, risked a universal catastrophe by attempting to steal anti-matter crystals from the distant planet of Zeta Minor. The Doctor averted disaster, but has in effect sent all Morestra up a technological cul-de-sac.

Now in his fifth regeneration, the Doctor becomes involved once again in Morestra's future. The empire has become a theocracy, and the all-powerful Church, finally discovering that Sorenson's world-spanning energy tower will never work, is attempting to save face by covertly returning to Zeta Minor to steal the powerful minerals they need. This time, they believe they are prepared for all eventualities...

With his companions embroiled in the ever-shifting loyalties and intrigues of the Morestran court, only the Doctor accepts that the forces of the anti-matter universe can never interact with our own. Can he stop something he started two thousand years ago?

Featuring the Fifth Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan, this adventure takes place between the TV stories ARC OF INFINITY and SNAKEDANCE, and is a sequel to the TV story PLANET OF EVIL.

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DOCTOR WHO

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SIMON MESSINGHAM

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BOOKS

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Julie and Alexander Kirk**

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Prologue

Time slowed.

Kavelli awoke from his three-month sleep.

The first he knew about it was the fear that pumped through him, fear that had travelled with him for two hundred light years. The fear that reminded him that the cryogenic tubes installed in this crumbling ship were working at fifty-three per cent efficiency.

A brief flash in his mind: a last depressing vision of his home planet. The cold sun hanging over the steppes, ancient metal gantries that webbed over the shuttle bowl, the glow of the orange sun. And on the ground, watching, the handful of scientists that had made it all possible. Their faces had been pale blotches wrapped in warming fur but Kavelli had felt their need, their hunger to succeed, for this mission to work.

A sudden lightning strobed across his eyes. The lid of the cryo opening up. A harsh snapping sound as the plastic shroud surrounding him cracked and split in the cold. A temperature so low Kavelli couldn't yet feel it.

He had survived. He wondered how many others had made it.

But he didn't wonder for long; the cold changed everything.

Some time later, Kavelli found himself on the bridge. His mind still chased itself with sleep-lag. Even arriving in this cramped room was a hazy memory.

He stared at the three green lights on the ship's computer terminal interface. His head cleared a little.

The ceiling began to glow, buzzing as ancient technology strained to rouse itself. Melted ice pooled over the plastic sheets covering the equipment. Water began to drop and seep through the grates in the floor as ancient heaters shuddered into life. Kavelli stretched, his palms pushing against the ceiling plates. His blue Space Service uniform was cold and damp. Like the ship, it was a relic from a different age. This costume irritated Kavelli. It seemed a conceit, unnecessary, a fantasy. And then he dropped the

thought from his conscious mind. There were things to be done.

All right, he thought, let's take a look. Without hesitation, he stabbed at a chunky rubber button on the primary console.

Huge, riveted screens from another age screeched and screamed open to reveal the dizzying infinity of space.

What the hell was this?

For a moment, the immensity and the distance crept into perspective, just at the edge of his reason. Kavelli felt fear; a primordial fear.

It was all wrong. Not immediately, not obviously, but it was wrong. Whatever it was that surrounded their tiny, pathetic little ship, this emptiness that stretched and curved into infinity, it bore little resemblance to the space lanes of the empire. This was...deranged. The blackness was bunched, like old cloth. Like something was hiding behind and looking in.

A handful of distant pustulant stars wove light into the black blanket. As Kavelli silently watched, purple nebulae crawled across space, thick as liquid. How far back were they? How many trillions of years of space and time did it take for their plum light to reach his eyes?

They were so far out. No one was meant to see this.

'Kavelli?'

He almost jumped, lost as he was in the dark. The voice reminded him of his job. The only way to stay sane in the face of what was outside. He had to keep his mind on the mission. That was what would save him.

A nervous voice. Young, female. Souah. Kavelli forced a smile on to his face. 'Hmm?'

'Four others.' Souah placed the old blue cap on her head. She looked tired. Not surprising after what she'd just seen. Stopping out a dead cryo unit was no one's idea of fun.

'Not bad.'

'Out of ten? You're pretty cold, aren't you, Kavelli?'

'It was a long sleep.' He couldn't resist the irony.

'Is that all you can say?'

Kavelli kept smiling. 'What do you want from me?'

Souah shook her head. She already looked beaten.

'Do you need any help with the bodies?' he asked.

'No, I ejected them.'

'Good.'

Souah clambered forward, over the crowded consoles of the bridge. She looked through the opened screens. Kavelli watched her reaction. She flinched and he saw goose bumps appear on her bare arms. She turned back to him, a haunted shadow behind her eyes.

‘My God.’

‘I thought we didn’t believe.’

Souah missed the jibe. She probably didn’t even hear it. ‘It’s so alien. So...different.’

She turned and stared again, as if hypnotised by the blackness.

Kavelli hoped Souah was rational enough to stay in control. Then he remembered his own irrationality, or rationality, it depended how you looked at it, and softened. He needed her.

‘Let’s get to work,’ he said, with deliberate gruffness.

Souah, almost without knowing, pushed the button to close the bridge screens. They rolled slowly down over the view, bringing back the illusion of safety, of proportion.

The giant ship pushed its way towards the solar system. Huge hydron tanks accounted for most of its bulk, bolted clumsily to the operator modules by half-trained technicians using half-remembered technology. The tanks were empty now, the sheer length of the journey draining them dry.

Lights flickered weakly across the hull, the last battered remnants of the exterior sensor array. The ship moved slowly, port thrusters compensating for the yawing spin that failed stabilisers had allowed to initiate.

Even the colours were cracked and faded. Age, distance and the battering from millions of tiny particles encountered on its marathon journey had successfully erased the bright red emblems of the Morestran noble house.

Whatever its condition, however, the ship had almost done its job. Those technicians would have been proud. For deep within the creaking hull, six crew members still survived.

They entered a solar system, a weak sun glowing an interminable distance away. The mighty thrusters powered down. Gravity, even the nominal gravity of this star, could be augmented and utilised. The ship shuddered and dipped, aligning itself. In the distance, a purple globe shone out, caught for an instant in the weak light of the star. The ship noticed and altered course accordingly.

They had found the planet.

'Coming up on it now, Commander. We will attain minimum orbit in thirteen seconds.'

Kavelli allowed himself a grin at his new title. Quaint. He stood up and climbed over the equipment and crew that stuffed this tiny bridge. He double-checked Ansar's sensor readings. Ansar, the one who had spoken, was young and impulsive, using the jargon of a different age. It was quite a fad on the home planet.

Moreover, Ansar, like the rest of the crew, insisted on wearing those dreadful white boots they used to issue in the old days. Kavelli just couldn't understand it. How could anyone take them seriously?

'All right,' said Kavelli neutrally. 'Get the orbit right for transference. I don't want to have to try and land this thing.'

'Commander!'

Kavelli sighed.

Jormaan, the archivist and the only true scientist on board, stared bug-eyed at the screen. The purple planet moved closer. 'This is it,' he was whispering. 'I can't believe it's there.'

The ship shuddered and for a sickening second Kavelli thought it had all gone wrong. That the hull had crumpled and warped. That whatever was there hiding behind the stars had reached out a black hand, encircled the ship and was crushing, crushing...

'Orbit achieved, Commander,' said Ansar. 'But it's not great. We can only hold it for a couple of hours.'

'What about transference?' asked Kavelli.

'Possible. If you're quick. You've got about two hours. Otherwise we'll never have enough fuel to make it back.'

Kavelli simply nodded.

'I suppose we'd better get moving,' said Jormaan. He was anxious, keen to confirm his discovery. He could hardly contain himself. 'This is a landmark, a cornerstone for our civilisation.'

'Just get ready,' Kavelli ordered.

Souah looked nervous as she unbuckled herself from her chair. 'I'd better prepare the med-packs.'

Kavelli smelt Jormaan's sweet, treacly breath as they squeezed past each other. It reminded him of the thick fluids that had preserved him in the cryo units; fluids that stayed in

the body for days, staining the skin yellow. They looked like the walking dead.

'You've done well, Kavelli,' Jormaan said sincerely.

'Just tell Marll to get the transfer on-line,' Kavelli snapped at him 'And break out the weapons.'

Jormaan obviously saw something in his expression and turned away, out of the control room.

Kavelli noticed Souah looking at him. She was nervous. She didn't want to go. 'Souah,' he said.

'I'm fine,' she replied quickly. 'I just can't help thinking...'

'What?'

She turned back to the screen. The planet was growing. It looked like a decaying fruit.

'If the legend is true.' Souah flinched. 'Then the planet's...well, it's alive.'

Something moved in the jungle. The air shimmered. It was tense, alive with pounding matter. In the dank purple light it was impossible to be absolutely sure what was tree, what was vine and what was water.

Kavelli appeared. He felt bad, like he'd been beaten. The transfer system was another one of those pieces of ancient technology that seemed like magic to his people. He reflected that if they had got organised then instead of this stupid suicide mission, they could have used the same drive and ambition to find alternative ways of solving the energy crisis. Of course, then he would have been called in to assassinate anyone who tried to do so.

'My head,' moaned Marll.

Presumably none of the others had been through a transference beam before. The young woman stumbled over a mass of roots. At least, Kavelli thought they were roots. He didn't like to think of the possibility that they might be a mass of faces.

He grabbed Marll by the webbing of her uniform. 'Stay alert. Get that weapon ready.'

Marll nodded, looking as if she might faint. Not for the first time, Kavelli wished for a couple of his old colleagues from the service. At least they had some idea.

The others appeared. Mikovski, Souah, Jormaan. Ansar remained on the ship, ready for the confirmation signal. All looked ill. Ill and frightened.

'Jormaan? The co-ordinates?' Kavelli asked.

'Of course.' Jormaan scratched his head, perhaps distracted by the fleshy jungle surrounding them.

'You do know the way?' smirked Mikovski.

As security operative, at least he looked as if he knew how to handle a weapon. Kavelli smiled when he saw Mikovski was using one of the old-fashioned energy rifles. Flashguns they called them. Great for lighting up jungles but fatally inaccurate for any other purpose. He tapped the shotgun strapped to his back.

'Of course,' snapped Jormaan. 'It was the interstellar coordinates that took all the time. They were suppressed by the Church. The actual planetary records have been passed down from the original mission. The Commander was meticulous in his administrative procedures and record-keeping. We have a full layout of the area that was explored —'

'Good, good,' Souah interrupted. She was looking around warily, as if expecting to be attacked at any second. 'Can we just get on with this?'

'Jormaan?' said Kavelli.

The little man pulled up his sleeve to reveal a wrist-comp. Like all contemporary technology it seemed too large, too unwieldy. He thumped at the keypad. The machine uttered a constant high-pitched beep. Jormaan turned to orient himself. 'This way.'

The group moved warily through the unsettling trees. What bothered Kavelli were the noises he heard all around, through the wrist-comp's signalling. Thus far they had seen no living creatures other than themselves. So what was making these sounds?

Mikovski took point, Marll the rear. Kavelli tried to ignore the noises he heard...or imagined he heard...from the jungle.

'What if it's true?' Souah hissed.

'What?' said Kavelli irritably.

'If it is, we won't even see it coming.'

'Then let's get this done quickly.'

Jormaan snapped to a halt. He was trembling.

'What is it?' asked Kavelli.

Jormaan turned to him. 'This is it. We're here.'

'Where?'

'The expedition.'

Kavelli looked round. He couldn't see anything different at all. Just the jungle.

'I don't see anything,' said Kavelli.

'Let's get out of here,' hissed Souah.

'For God's sake, man,' replied Jormaän, 'it's been two thousand years. The building won't still be standing.'

'The jungle,' said Souah strangely. 'It took it back.'

There was a noise deep within the trees. A rattling noise, like a loud wind moving through the vines.

'Oh God,' whispered Souah.

'Jormaän, we have to be sure!' snapped Kavelli.

'We're here,' he stated desperately, 'I swear it.'

Marll was staring into the trees. 'There...something...I...'

Kavelli heard the rattling sound again. It was getting louder. 'Jormaän. I need evidence.'

Souah fell to her knees. 'It's coming..' She was sobbing now. 'Please...not me...'

Kavelli felt his temper rising. They had minutes, maybe less. He raised his shotgun to Jormaän's head. 'I need evidence. I'm not transmitting to anyone that we've found a patch of jungle.'

'Ow!' Marll shouted suddenly. The guns turned and trained on her. She looked round sheepishly. 'Tripped.'

Jormaän was straight down at her feet. He pulled away at undergrowth that reminded Kavelli uncomfortably of veins and nerve endings. At last he seemed satisfied. He was breathless, stunned by whatever it was he had discovered.

The noise from the jungle was close now. Very close. It was the noise of something systematically working its way towards them.

'It's true,' whispered Jormaän. 'It's all true.'

Kavelli shot him in the back. The archivist was propelled over his discovery. Mikovski, stunned, turned to him. 'What the —'

Kavelli shot him through the heart. The blast from the shotgun resounded through the jungle. Kavelli reloaded, not hurrying.

'Marll, drop your weapon,' he ordered. Sensibly, Marll obeyed. Souah seemed not to have heard, her consciousness seemingly fully directed on the noise approaching from the jungle.

'We don't have much time,' Kavelli snapped. 'Lift Jormaän out the way. I want to see it.'

'I think I knew this all along,' said Marll. 'I wondered...the risk of contamination...they had to do something.'

‘Just do what you’re told.’

Marll leaned across and pulled Jormaan’s body over. She looked down. ‘He was right then,’ she said. ‘It is true. We’ve succeeded. I wonder whether we should have.’

Kavelli raised his rifle again.

Marll looked up. ‘Wait,’ she said calmly.

Kavelli fired.

He knew he had to see for himself. He walked towards the ancient lumps protruding from the ground. He pulled away a rusted metal plate. It was grimy but the words etched on to it were legible enough:

EGARD LUMB

Died here 7y2

In the year 37,166

The mission was complete.

Kavelli snapped open the communicator channel to the ship.

‘Ansar here.’

‘Positive confirmation. Repeat: positive confirmation.’

‘Thank God. It’s creepy here on my own. I hear things. Like voices.’

The noise from the jungle was right on top of them. The vines began to sway.

Souah screamed. Kavelli shot her down.

‘Ansar! Launch the drone! Launch the drone!’

The noise became deafening.

The communicator channel collapsed in a heap of static. No other sound.

‘Commander? Commander?’ Ansar repeated hollowly.

He flicked the channel closed. They were all dead.

This was Zeta Minor.

Ansar felt he was at the apex of a huge pyramid. From this point, Morestran history would change.

He unlocked the drone-firing mechanism.

Despite everything, he couldn’t help his feeling of elation. He was going to be the most important man in history. If he didn’t fire the drone, it was the end of the Morestran Empire. If he did, he would become its saviour. The Scientists would become lauded. Technology would return. The fabled new fuel source would bring a new age of prosperity. And all

because of him Ansar smiled to himself. He would be a hero; bigger even than Sorenson.

He launched the drone and watched on the monitor as the slim pencil-like shape, the most advanced piece of machinery still known to the Morestrans, detached itself from the ugly hulking ship and disappeared in an instant back home.

He was going to be very, very famous.

Ansar leaned back into his chair just as the self-destruct timer charges hidden beneath the floor vaporised him, the bridge and the ship.

The Tower

Chapter One

Excerpt from 'THE WATCHTOWER' – underground manuscript broadsheet printed and produced by unknown subversive elements at the Sorenson Academy. Document seized: 4.10.92 New Church Calendar.

CONSPIRACY?

Hark!! Listen up, Brothers and Sisters!! We have important news for you!!!

It's the story of the year: last week prize student Brother Robeson, prodigy (some say boffin) of the Dimensional Mechanics Department, decided the burden of responsibility towards our esteemed Tower was too much for him. He took the blasphemous option of hanging himself in his cell before breakfast (note to the kitchen: you have been warned about the salt levels in the oatmeal!!!).

This is common knowledge.

What is not common knowledge is that our erstwhile Dean, Fr Littell, was contacted by our late friend just two days before the incident. Sources have indicated that voices were raised, and Robeson was in some distress. We wonder what it was they discussed (we're willing to bet it wasn't the tensile strength of belt rope) and why Fr Littell decided to retire (or was retired) off-world just yesterday.

What is also uncommon knowledge is that our grubby moles at The Watchtower were contacted by a frightened brother, who of course will remain nameless, who swears he saw two hooded fellows leaving the cell that very night.

Now, obviously, far be it from us to suggest that our brave sponsors here at the Academy would have hidden any information from us concerning Brother Robeson's rather extreme decision. Indeed, this would be seditious and unfounded and we would never do it! After all, they have explained in detail that Robeson had become depressed by the good-natured ribbing that any particularly able and loyal

student naturally receives from envious and less intellectually endowed rivals and why shouldn't we believe them?

However, as the brightest minds of the Morestran Empire reside here, surely we are able to uncover more of this strange case and bring the truth to light?

So come on, Brothers! Get your thinking caps on. What did happen that night? Don't we have a right to know?

We won't tell on you.

Abbot Pumphris waited for the Monsignor in the courtyard of the great Abbey. The stone gates were closed now, but the Abbot had heard the roar of the shuttle as it lowered itself on to the roughhewn landing pad.

He should have gone out to meet the Monsignor personally but was gambling that a small show of arrogance might improve his status with their distinguished visitor.

No need to ask why he had come. There was only one reason such an eminent member of the Church would travel out here and he was currently languishing in the cellars deep inside the mountain into which the Abbey had been cut. Overhead, stormclouds were forming in portentous bunches. Pumphris hoped that the Dark Gods would look favourably on the imminent meeting.

Half-starved monks pulled on the creaking wooden wheels and the gates swung slowly open. It was indeed a Monsignor, the Abbot didn't know which one, and he'd brought a full retinue along with him.

The Monsignor, a fat rouged man in purple robes, was holding a perfumed handkerchief in front of his wide nose. As the retinue, armed with ceremonial rifles, rushed inside, the Monsignor stared straight at the Abbot.

'Let's dispense with the pleasantries,' he said. 'This planet stinks.'

Monsignor du Carallan was bored. He was also worried about his position on the Church High Council. Why had he been sent here? It was a prestigious task but not prestigious enough. Secure members of the High Council never left Archetryx. It was too dangerous. He wondered what was going on in his absence. Best to get this over with, do a good

job and get back to sort out those who were at this moment undoubtedly trying to usurp him.

The Abbot was trying to impress. A fool who'd volunteered for this living hell thinking it would move him up the ladder. Sentenced himself willingly to half a lifetime's clinging to this forgotten, barren rock. Did he really think it would help?

Even then he had almost lost his sole charge. Eight escape attempts, three serious. A list of bodies that kept mounting. Last time, the prisoner had made it to a supply shuttle. Only the timely shooting of the pilot by the guards had prevented it leaving. Did the Abbot really expect praise for the way he'd handled his time here?

'As you can see, Your Eminence, we take the utmost precautions,' Pumphris whinged.

Du Carallan sniffed as he followed the idiot down the winding stone steps. Torches burned on the walls, filling the air with even more noxious fumes.

The steps came to abrupt end. A blank wall.

'If you're wasting my time...' snarled du Carallan.

The Abbott raised his hands, as if to deflect a blow. 'Concrete walls. No door. We lower his food and water down to him through the ceiling. After the last attempt we took no chances. There is no way out.'

The Abbot beckoned to someone behind du Carallan. Footsteps on the stone.

The Monsignor was jostled respectfully out of the way by two monks carrying sledgehammers. Du Carailan felt himself losing his patience. The Abbot smiled but his eyes showed dread.

The monks hammered the stones.

When the dust cleared and one of the blocks was prised loose, du Carallan, blinking back tears, realised he was faintly disappointed to see that the prisoner was still there.

'As you can see,' stuttered the Abbot, 'no chance of escape.'

They had chained him to the floor. The prisoner was stretched out face upwards. The chains were bolted to the ground.

He didn't blink, didn't react in any way to the dust and the noise.

'You keep him like this all the time?' The Monsignor regretted the question immediately. It betrayed his interest. 'Your orders were to keep him healthy.'

The Abbot was wiping grit from his eye. His long nose was streaming.

'He is exercised once a day, Your Eminence. A potion is administered to dull the senses and he is led round the dungeon by four armed guards lowered from the ceiling.'

'You drug him?'

'Alas, many years ago, the prisoner killed the four that were sent down. It was the only way to prevent further loss.'

Du Carallan had to admit he was impressed. It appeared that Kristyan Fall, ex-Church Service agent, the Zero Man, was as dangerous as the reputation that preceded him.

'Unlock these chains. Set me free.' Fall spoke. An order, a demand.

Du Carallan, for the first time, felt fear. Fear, like a droplet of ice.

'Just listen.' He kept his voice steady.

Abbot Pumphris was hovering nearby, and the rest of du Carallan's monks were positioned through the broken gap in the cell wall. Pumphris was openly sweating; he'd probably never been this close to Fall before. Not if he had been wise he hadn't.

Kristyan Fall craned his neck round to face the Monsignor. The rumours were true, the ex-agent was devastatingly handsome. Black hair, a small comma of it falling across his face, blue eyes, rugged chin. Handsome and sophisticated. Du Carallan was impressed: even five years of unremitting privation and torture hadn't altered his legendary features. 'A visit from a Monsignor? Either I'm now expendable or –'

Fall sounded indifferent but there was steel in his voice.

'It's your lucky day,' said du Carallan. He glanced at Abbot Pumphris, who had clearly failed to comprehend. Stupid fool. Du Carallan continued: 'We're releasing you.'

'Really.'

'Yes, really. We need you.'

At last, the Abbot appeared to be waking up. He started to stammer, 'What? What's going on...'

Du Carallan cut him off. 'We've got a job for you.'

Fall laughed. 'Why should I trust you?'

'You shouldn't. You already know we wouldn't have gone to a lot of time and effort keeping you here in this unpleasant place –' du Carallan waved theatrically at the dungeon – 'if we weren't going to call upon your services again.'

Abbot Pumphris had flushed purple. 'Why wasn't I informed of this?'

'And what's to stop me breaking out as soon as I get the opportunity? I don't owe you anything.' Fall was calm, interested in du Carallan's reply.

'Profit,' du Carallan said simply. 'One of the reasons for your incarceration was our discovery of certain operations run by you that, shall we say, went beyond the call of duty.'

'I must protest!' shouted the shaking Abbot.

'Oh, shut up,' said du Carallan wearily, turning his attention back to Fall. 'We know that any thoughts of revenge against the Church will be more than overcome by the rewards this little task of ours can provide.'

'You sound very sure of yourself.'

'Oh, I am.'

'I'll think about it.'

'No time. You're coming with me.' Du Carallan stared at Pumphris, whose inability to speak seemed to be causing him physical pain.

Fall laid his head back on the flagstones. 'It's been a long time. I'll need to get into shape.'

'Of course, dear boy. That's why we're giving you the Abbot here. For ten minutes. Call it a warm-up.'

Abbot Pumphris stopped his jabbering. He went white. 'No,' he whispered. 'I've served you faithfully, done everything you asked...'

Du Carallan was already leaving. He beckoned in his captain, who held a large chain of keys. 'And you've performed wonderfully. Goodbye.'

Pumphris was on his knees. He flailed at du Carallan's robe. 'Please, in the name of the gods...'

Du Carallan kicked him away and stepped through the hole in the wall.

Kristyan Fall was smiling as the chains clicked open.

Monsignor du Carallan was lounging in his gold-trimmed shuttle seat when Kristyan Fall was escorted on board. He sipped his wine.

'That was more than ten minutes.'

Fall nodded softly. 'Out of practice.'

'Have some wine.' He reached down for the brass intercom button. 'Pilot, let us leave immediately.'

The engines began to whine into life as he poured the wine for Fall. He grinned, exposing his large yellow teeth. 'What a dreadful little planet.'

The Doctor sniffed and raised his hat from his face. The sudden breeze was cold, markedly cold. He squinted while his eyes adjusted to the white light. Gradually, the geography came into focus: friable orange cliffs, white sand, turquoise sea. Out on the horizon a thin unbroken black line. Clouds. What had he been thinking about?

Around him, families were laughing. Men and women lay spread on beach towels. Children splashed in the rock pools, crying out as fish swam around them.

The Doctor stretched in his deck chair, white pumps wagging out from striped trousers.

The breeze again. A strange contrast. It should have been pleasant – after all, the temperature was high and the air dry. But the breeze was clammy, as if it had blustered out from deep, empty places. A storm on its way. A storm?

He was uneasy. He trusted his instincts and something about this breeze wasn't right. He stood up and pulled on his tan coat, straightening the sprig of celery as a matter of course. The black line out to sea was moving in. Closing in.

A beach ball thumped past him in the sand, followed by a shouting child in trunks.

His mind: like a water system. An image. It helped.

Down low, down below the surface, the vast dark reservoir of the subconscious, the rich well of half-formed impulses, perceptions, impressions, snapshots. Taking in raw data: the approaching black cloud-line, the breeze blowing in. A distant roar.

He stared at the sea. Why was the tide retreating? How could it go out so quickly? A baby, squatting in the breaking waves, confused as its warm bath disappeared, leaving it lying there, salt crystallising on its legs.

The Doctor glared at the ominous black line. Ideas, concepts, conclusions.

That was no cloud.

It was water. Black water.

Heads were turning now. The noise abated as more and more holidaymakers turned to watch the wall of ocean bearing down on them.

Black tsunami.

A wave so black it cast no reflection. Water, hundreds of feet high, blocking out the sun. Perhaps two miles away.

The breeze was a gale now, sucked like everything towards the wave. The Doctor saw the beach ball, now no more than a tiny speck, hurtle away from the shore and dissolve like a pinprick into the wall. He removed his hat, completely helpless. He blocked the screams of the panicking holidaymakers from his mind.

Where was the TARDIS?

In a way, the futility of his position concentrated his mind wonderfully. He stared at the onyx water, watching the tassels of foam play at the peak of its indescribable height. He realised his own impact would make no difference to the eventual destination and break of the tsunami. It would crash far inland, perhaps shattering the ancient stone of the mountains. The power of this natural force. He was impressed.

The ground was thundering now. The sand of the beach rattled beneath his feet. He kept his eyes locked on the black wave. It roared like a beast. He could now see nothing else.

He fell to his knees, breathless, hearts beating. His fingers touched warm floor. He realised he was braced for impact. He pressed down, wanting to feel the reality, still hearing the roar in his head.

The TARDIS lights were dimmed; night simulation. No sound but the familiar hum. He felt like he'd been dropped here from a great height.

He looked up. The console panel was still open, the way he'd left it. Components lay spilled across the floor along with the tools for working on them. He liked to tinker while Nyssa and Tegan slept.

He controlled his breathing, his mind still full of the immense wave, of the roar and helplessness. He reached to the console for reassurance. He was here. It was quiet. It was safe.

'Doctor?' came a soft voice from the door. Nyssa in a nightshirt, eyes and voice full of sleep. He felt unconscionably glad to see her.

'Are you all right?' she asked, the ever-present tenderness in her voice.

The Doctor launched himself energetically upwards. 'Of course.'

'You were shouting.'

He began to toy with buttons on the console. 'It was nothing.'

Nyssa grasped his arm. She could always see through his little dodges. 'Doctor.'

He smiled. What was the point in not telling her? 'Hallucination. Violent visual and aural hallucination.'

'Again?'

'What do you mean, again?'

Nyssa stared right at him. 'Don't pretend. Tegan and I have both noticed it. Every now and then, since Adric...since...'

'Really? I thought I was hiding it rather well.'

'I'm afraid not. What's happening to you?'

The Doctor paused. How could he relay the immensity of the image that had consumed him? 'It was a great...wave. A wave of blackness.'

'An energy wave?'

'No, a real wave. Water. The other visions, they were half-formed, insubstantial without...without focus. This one was like a scene, an image. It was real, at least it was real in that I felt I was in another place.'

He snapped away, back to the console.

'You're pale. Shaking. Do you feel ill?'

He forced a lightness into his voice. 'You know what I think?'

'What?'

Again, he saw that Nyssa wasn't fooled by his tactics. He took a deep breath.

'I think someone was hijacking my mind.'

He prayed the boy wouldn't mess it up.

Lord Ferdinand, first son of the House of Vindice, cursed and squinted again through the ancient telescope that lay perched on the parapet of this old warehouse, watching the dead building opposite for the flagged signal that would confirm target sighting. He shifted for the umpteenth time up on the roof of this decrepit tenement block, deep in the old docklands. To think these black shells were once 'desirable residences'. Now they just hung, top-heavy, over the ruins of the paved harbour piazza. There was no one here, not anyone who wanted to be found anyway.

He knew he didn't look much like a field operative, what with his balding head, spectacles and weak chin. Still, none

of his colleagues doubted him. He'd organised too much action for that.

He didn't travel to Alpha Minor very often but the boy was certain he had a big player – which meant big Church player, and Ferdinand couldn't resist that.

The air was cold, coming in from the inky sea. Actually, he supposed it could have been nice here once, before the warming. Only Scientists to be found here, so the rumours said.

Same rumours that said they'd built their own launch site. That they'd sent off a ship, strapped up with power and long-distance cryo, and nobody knew where it ended up or why. That the Church had a new man behind the scenes.

A flag. Two vertical waves.

Ferdinand would have murdered for a pair of the old space fleet communicators. Surely they must have some. Signalling with flags was a joke.

He heard hooves on broken flagstones and squinted again. Ferdinand had one man positioned inside the warehouse and two in the house opposite. The boy had to be safe unless he did something stupid. Or already had.

A gust reduced Alpha Major's round reflection in the water to flickering slivers.

Ferdinand clicked six rounds into his revolver.

A black ex-limo bounced into the piazza, hauled by two equally black horses, their hooves ringing sparks from the old stones. No markings on the vehicle, its cracked solar panels dating it a century old. So, if the Player was big, he still wasn't brave enough to do this in the open. Ferdinand had to get an identity confirm.

Not for the first time, Ferdinand wondered whether he'd done the right thing letting the boy get in so deep. Prince Julius XIII, nephew of the Duke of Tirens; in his early twenties and eager for anti-Church action. Too eager.

But nobody knew who he was, and possessing a title with that muscle...what could Ferdinand, a mere Lord and a disgraced and impoverished one at that, do to stop it? Just let him get through this night alive, try not to remember that softness in his face, that thought it was all a game. The impetuosity that would get him killed.

The ex-limo stopped right where it was supposed to. Steam fired from the horses' nostrils.

Ferdinand adjusted the telescope. He was looking straight down now, the device hooded to prevent glare from the home planet. Two bodyguards, clearly Church retinue despite the mufti. One opened the door while the other eyeballed the piazza. Too bad he didn't have the brains to look up.

Getting out: a fat breathless old fool, not in his robes but giving himself away with the rings on his chubby fingers. Ferdinand spotted the gold emblem on the fourth finger of the left hand. Meaning: undying devotion to the service of *Torre del Oro*.

Which meant Fat Man was a Monsignor. Or higher. Maybe the boy *had* pulled in someone really big.

Ferdinand's mouth went dry.

The boy followed Fat Man out of the ex-limo. He said something and indicated the previously arranged warehouse doorway.

Ferdinand thought again of his sister and what they'd done to her. Salt stung his nostrils. Castiza. Her. The Church. This would be his eighteenth illegal roust. And each one had been worth it. There could never be enough of them.

He heard the scrape of warehouse doors and crawled on his belly to the skylight. Harwood was waiting for him. The old, trusting face gleamed in the light. He nodded. Ferdinand nodded back. They moved.

Bodyguard #1 hauling the tracked doors shut. In the empty barn: swinging hurricane lamps, Fat Man gleaming with sweaty excitement, voices low in the almost darkness.

Fat Man was keen. They couldn't get enough technology, ever. They loved it, wanted it all the time, more and more of it. It made Ferdinand's job easier but it was expensive bait. He listened, with Harwood sticking to him like an ugly shadow.

'An oculoid tracker, you say?'

'Yes, patron, very old but very functional. And not cheap.'

Good, the boy had front. Still playing the technology pimp.

'Where?'

'Money first. You've seen the picture.'

'Don't play games with me,' said Fat Man. 'I'm bigger and nastier than you could possibly imagine.'

Harwood nudged Ferdinand. In the doorway, bodyguard #1 pulling a revolver.

Ferdinand closed his eyes.

He could only see silhouettes and he wanted to tell the boy to move, that he was blown, that he was in danger.

'Calm down, Monsee-nor,' said the boy. Still cocky, which calmed Ferdinand about an eighth of a heartbeat. 'Else, why would you be here?'

'Show me.' Fat Man wanted to trust. The OT always pulled them in so far they just couldn't leave it, no matter how hard they tried.

The boy led Fat Man to the crate where the Morestran Space Service Oculoid Tracker Mark VI, borrowed by the SIS from the private Imperial House Museum itself, lay neatly sealed in a crate. #1 followed, glancing around, suspecting something, expecting trouble.

Harwood would take him. Ferdinand was a lousy shot.

This Church man was careful. Sometimes they got so greedy they didn't even look, just handed over the cash. This one wanted to see.

The boy unsealed the plastic wrapper and pulled the wooden lid free. Fat Man stared like he was looking at *il Dottore* himself. In awe.

'An oculoid tracker. Indeed.'

'An oculoid tracker.'

The boy was cool. Ferdinand had to admire his courage. He would know he and Harwood were here somewhere but that was no guarantee of safety.

'I told you. Didn't I tell you? Now, Monsee-nor, payment. It's programmed to return to base should you try anything. The lens is fully functional. My friends are watching you. Smile.'

Fat Man turned to the boy. Ferdinand saw a flash of large yellow teeth as he held the lamp up to his face.

'A magnificent beast. And where did a child like you get the intelligence to obtain one?'

Ferdinand went cold.

'Eh?'

'I knew it wasn't right,' Fatty was saying in his fruity, magisterial tones. 'You're setting me up.'

'No —'

Something sprang from Fat Man's ring into the boy's neck. He dropped to the ground, clutching at the dark liquid suddenly streaming through his fingers.

'Captain,' said Fat Man, 'get the crate.'

'NO!' screamed Ferdinand and leapt up, aiming his gun. #1 raised his weapon. Harwood expertly shot him down. A second shot outside mirrored the one inside. His men taking care of #2.

Ferdinand fired wild, bullets sparking round the warehouse. He was furious, a red sea masking his mind, oblivious to everything but the boy's needless death. He'd done everything right, acted faultlessly, played his part right to the end. And the Monsignor had killed him because it was easier than paying him.

'Don't! Don't!' cried Fat Man. 'By the Dark Gods! Don't kill me, I know things! Big things! Bigger than you can imagine!'

Ferdinand reached him and kicked him over. Fat Man was quivering.

Shaking with rage, Ferdinand pointed his weapon at Fat Man's head. 'Look at me, scum.'

Fat Man shook his head, his eyes firmly on the floor. 'No, please...'

'I said, look!'

Fat Man raised his head. Ferdinand's fingers closed around the trigger. Then Harwood's arms were round Ferdinand and pulling him away through the boy's spreading blood. 'You're dead!' he screeched.

Monsignor du Carallan sat up, pale but quickly regaining his dignity. 'You can't kill me. I know things.'

Ferdinand struggled in Harwood's iron grip. His arms flailed at du Carallan. 'Not this time!'

'I can help you!'

'Dead man!'

'You're not going to believe what I've got to tell you.'

Transcript: received Imperial Offices –
Code registered RED – Nobles of Princely Rank and above ONLY. Report delivered:18-45 Morestran Capital Time. NCC 01.03.1998.

Official Scribe: Sorrel.

Termination expedited post-transcript. Ho. 01.03.98.

Ho = His Most Noble Imperious Majesty the Lord of the Host Systems Hippolito.

F = Special Operative #657 Ferdinand V.

TRANSCRIPT READS:

Ho: A very pleasant surprise, Ferdinand. I heard about your little excursion to Minor. I take it you have news for me?

F: I hope I haven't called at an inconvenient moment, Lord Hippolito.

Ho: Not at all. As you know, my interest in your investigations is most acute. However, as not even I can guarantee full security on an open channel, I suggest we get to the point.

F: Yes, sir. The thing is, I think one of their operatives believed sanctioned has reappeared.

Ho: Really? Which one?

F: Well, that's the real surprise. It's Kristyan Fall. So I hear.

(A fifteen-second pause)

Ho: How reliable is your information?

F: I think, eighty per cent...no, I'm sure, sir. The informant approached me voluntarily and asked for protection.

Ho: And has protection been supplied?

F: Of course not, sir. Your standard interrogation instructions preclude allowing such security. It helps them with their memory.

Ho: Did he say what Fall was up to?

F: Only that it was big. Very big.

Ho: Undoubtedly. Kindly explain to your informant that in order to receive sanctuary he will have to supply something we couldn't work out for ourselves.

F: I did that, sir.

Ho: And?

F: I think it concerns our...special interest. Something to do with the Academy. I don't want to say anything over the comlink. I'll send details through the usual channels.

Ho: Keep working on this informant. I need to know everything. I'll give you priority. Arrange a drop with our liaison. Anything you want, you've got it. New instructions, as if you need them. Find Kristyan Fall.

F: Sir...

Ho: If he's still alive...the Dark Gods protect us all.

CONTACT TERMINATED.

Alone again, the Doctor tried to apply himself to unravelling the mystery of his visions. What could they mean?

There was the possibility that they had no meaning at all. Perhaps, as Nyssa had suggested, he was ill. Such a thought was so far-reaching, so appalling, that he wouldn't accept it. He simply did not believe that his mind had slipped so far that it was doing this to him without any forewarning. This horrific private little lightshow was not of his making. If it were...no. He would not go down that path.

So. The meaning of the black tsunami.

A black wave, hundreds of feet high, engulfing him. Not just him, everything and everyone around him too. And what about the mountains? Were they important? The holidaymakers, was that something too?

Was water important? The breeze? Why was he the first to spot the danger?

Clearly, the most obvious inference was that something was going to be threatened by whatever the reality behind the tsunami was. Something dark, moving, implacable, utterly consuming.

Why had it made him feel so helpless?

This disturbed him greatly, the idea that a situation was ever truly hopeless, something that couldn't be overcome with thought and resourcefulness. He had never been one to sit back and wait for rescue. He had never believed in *deus ex machina*.

He felt like a translator deciphering an unknown language. His mind was interpreting the events in its own way. Providing him with reference points that he could comprehend. He was certain the wave was a symbol of other things and this was the best he could come up with to understand them.

Another thought was occurring to him. He wasn't translating very well. The messages were coming in thicker and stronger every time, becoming blunter, less refined. What had started off as a series of feelings, abstract shapes and symbols was condensing, intensifying. He had the comic notion of a telegraph operator somewhere at the other end of the line becoming increasingly exasperated with him and continually being forced to repeat the message, making it simpler and simpler with fewer and fewer words.

He realised he would have to work a lot harder to get this message clear. And quicker. If not, that telegraph operator was going to destroy his mind.

Kristyan Fall watched the monitors. His operatives were seated round the conference table, awaiting his entrance. They hadn't even noticed the cameras tucked high into the rock ceilings.

He believed he had been thorough enough in his choices. Church and medical personnel discreetly assembled from a number of related projects throughout the empire. Even some from the Sorenson Academy itself. Oh, and one or two of his old 'specials' from the Church Service to keep everyone in line.

He, of course, was dressed in a black suit. It was well known that Kristyan Fall loved his clothes and insisted on the very best. Not for him the drab robes of the Service. Life was too short. The best of everything. Enjoy it while it lasts.

It was time.

He opened the door to the conference room. The gasps were worth the three hours of waiting in the shuttle bay in order to maximise his entrance. Here came the legend. Kristyan Fall, the Church Service's top agent, the Zero Man, back from the dead.

He moved gracefully, a gentle smile touching his lips. Eyes were on him as he sat back into his padded seat at the head of the table.

'Good afternoon. Let us begin.'

ZETA PROJECT PRIVATE TRANSCRIPT #852-libris.
01.04.98.

Zero Class operatives eyes only.

PERSONNEL IN ATTENDANCE:

0 – Kristyan Fall.

AB – Apothecary, the most Gentle Father, Boyd – Head of Operations, Zeta Project.

MU – Monsignor d'Undine – Head of Project Security.

AY – Apothecary Yarrow – Head of Administration, Zeta Project.

FK – Father Kirk – supervisor of the Greater Ward.

SI – Sister Ilsa of the Order of Corpus Morestrana – supervisor of the Lesser Ward.

All relevant department heads.

Meeting duration: three hours twenty-eight minutes.

TRANSCRIPT EXTRACT: Time: 00.00 to 00.04.

O: Good afternoon. Let us begin. Monsignor d'Undine, it's been a long time. How is the wine?

MU: No good, Mr Fall. No [deleted] good at all.

O: Apothecary Yarrow, first things first. If I am to visit you here, you must procure wine of high quality.

AY: Of course, Mr Fall. I will see to the matter as soon as the meeting is concluded.

O: You'd better. Now, gentlemen. Reports, please. Apothecary Boyd, as project manager I think it only fair to ask you to begin.

AB: Thank you. After five years' construction I am pleased to report that the operations centre here is now on-line. We have been processing subjects for two months and projections lead us to conclude that the Zeta Project will be complete within the allotted time of eight months. Obviously, as with any project of such magnitude there are a number of start-up troubles, but assuming that we receive a constant supply of subjects I am confident that we can expect success, within two per cent accuracy.

O: I'm glad to hear it. Except...

AB: Yes, Mr Fall?

O: I'm rearranging the schedule. I want completion in six months, not eight. Any problems?

(A sixteen-second pause)

AB: Six months?

O: That's what I said, Apothecary Boyd. Don't make me repeat myself.

AB: But...but...if we're to generate anything like the targets...that nearly triples our need for subjects. Is this an official request from the Grand Council?

O: Thank you for reminding me of those we serve. However, I would be saddened to feel that you were not enthusiastic. Remember, there are no problems, only challenges.

AB: Of course, Mr Fall, I'm extremely enthusiastic.

O: Glad to hear it, Apothecary. I'd hate to think that our need for subjects would necessitate looking on our own doorstep.

(A five-second pause)

AB: I'm very confident.

O: You don't know how happy you've made me.

AY: Th – There is the question of the transport ships, Mr Fall. Our available transports are already limited and subject procurement already uses up eighty per cent of fiscal

resources. Add to that the prob – challenge of the antique nature of Morestran spaceships.

O: The matter is in hand, Apothecary Yarrow. Two new starships will be arriving here by the end of the week.

MU: Where the [deleted] did you get them from? We've grabbed every spare ship in the Church fleet.

O: Oh, I managed to persuade some of our imperial friends to donate to the cause.

MU: You did what? You know what the empire would do if it knew about us? [deleted] us, that's what.

O: Don't worry. I was very thorough.

MU: I [deleted] hope so.

O: Now, unless there's anything else, I'd like to discuss the finer details of the Zeta Project. My time here is limited and I need full briefings from everyone present. Let us continue.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS.

The Doctor was running. He was in some kind of brightly lit corridor. It stretched in front of him apparently endlessly. The air smelled of ozone and electricity.

His back was cold. Cold because a great black shadow was lumbering ceaselessly after him. He couldn't see it but he knew that it filled the corridor and nothing could stop it. The shadow was gaining.

He wanted to apply his mental energies to the problem. He wanted to think his way into an escape but the remorselessness and the pace of the shadow were too fast, too immense for logical thought. He had the feeling that if he could step out of the corridor to whatever was outside, he would see that the shadow was endless, an unstoppable wall of infinite dimension moving to swallow him and everything else.

He kept running. The ceiling strip lights flickered and failed as the dark shadow touched them. The Doctor was tiring but he knew any pause would be fatal.

Something at the end of the corridor. A door.

He felt a new energy in his legs and he sprinted forward. The shadow screeched but he felt himself gaining space. The door was a hatch, a familiar design, a design he had encountered before somewhere on his travels, a long, long time ago. If only he could remember.

The black shadow was still coming but he knew he could make it. The hatch was closed, a key pad embedded in the wall next to it. He would need the correct code to open it. Ignoring the black mass behind him, he allowed himself time to think. What would be the code? A series of digits but what and how many? He had the notion that somehow he knew the answer if only he could think. Something to do with the design of the door. Something to do with his past.

The black shadow was on him. He remembered.

Nobody knows anybody. Not really.

Tegan was on her bed, not reading a book, trying not to think about whether or not the Doctor was cracking up since Adric's death.

It was worrying to think that the captain of the ship might be losing control. Without the reassurance of the Doctor, Tegan realised the TARDIS could be a cold, uneasy place. Which is why she and Nyssa had agreed to have one of them watching him at all times.

On four separate occasions now he had collapsed, suffering from these hallucinations. The last time he had been so still he could have been dead. And she thought she knew him. But of course, nobody really knew anybody.

And then she found herself heading for the floor. She shrieked and landed heavily, the book tumbling on top of her.

'What's he doing now?' she snapped.

The TARDIS replied by way of another lurch, which sent her rolling into a chest of drawers.

'Come on!' Nyssa yelled from her doorway.

'Another one?' asked Tegan. She tried to get herself up.

'I don't know. He was quiet and then he jumped up and started feeding co-ordinates into the TARDIS.'

Together they staggered to the control room as a series of jolts sent them spinning down the corridor.

The Doctor was hunched over the console, his face screwed up with concentration. His fingers danced over the ship's stabilisers and he braced himself for more lurches.

'What are you doing?' shrieked Tegan. She was shaken by the determined look on the Doctor's face.

'No time to explain, just hang on tight.'

'Now wait a minute,' Tegan started.

Nyssa held her back. 'It's all right. I think he knows what he's...' Another shudder halted the completion of her sentence.

'Sorry about the turbulence,' shouted the Doctor over a sudden howl from the console. 'Trust me.'

Tegan stood firmly holding on to the door frame, waiting for another jolt. It never arrived. As she watched, the Doctor fell to the floor, holding his ears as if warding off some unbearable sound.

'Doctor!' she bellowed.

Nyssa reached him first. 'He's unconscious. Probably self-induced.'

'Nyssa, what's going on?'

'Just look at the co-ordinates. Find out where we are. I'll try and make him comfortable.'

'He had an attack, didn't he?'

'Yes. Tegan, come on. I've got to get him comfortable. The co-ordinates, it might give us a clue.'

Tegan decided to stall further questions. Nyssa, as usual, was playing nurse.

Tegan tentatively touched the TARDIS computer, not trusting this machine, expecting it to throw her around again. Instead, she felt the familiar bump of materialisation. The central column slowed and ceased. The computer screen beeped up digits.

'What does it say?' asked Nyssa.

Tegan stared.

'Tegan?'

Tegan stood back. 'It's the future. A long way. Over thirty thousand years. And the distance...'

The Doctor stirred. 'Had to do it. Realised the only way was to go into my...my subconscious mind. Work on instinct. Find what they'd put there.'

'They?' asked Tegan.

'Confront the image directly. It made me...made me... reprogram.' He was out again.

Nyssa held his head and lowered it gently to the floor. She removed her jacket and placed it beneath his skull. 'I think we need help,' she said softly.

Tegan was already looking for her coat. 'Well, wherever we are there must be someone. I mean, he seemed to know what he was doing, didn't he?'

Tegan refused to acknowledge Nyssa's ironic stare, and opened the doors.

Nyssa cradled the Doctor's head. He was very pale now and his breathing shallow. She knew enough about his strange physiology to guess that he was mentally putting himself out of harm's way. An attempt to stave off whatever was eating away at his brain. Certainly, the moments before he had leapt up to reprogram the TARDIS, when she had been watching him, he had suffered a massive mental trauma. He had been writhing and raving, going on about 'the black wave' again, as well as more arcane shouts, all to do with doom and destruction. It had appeared that he was losing out to whatever force was striking at him.

And now he appeared to be dying. She had to help.

She forced herself to calm down and think. Her instincts told her to stay and make sure he was kept safe, administering what help she could.

But what could she actually do? He was fighting as best he could. She couldn't help in that. Also, his last action had been to direct the TARDIS to, well, wherever they were. There must have been reason for this. He must want something from the place. Tegan may have been impulsive but she may also have been right.

Nyssa looked down at the Doctor again, looking for a clue in his boyish face. Nothing. The decision was hers.

'Tegan, wait!' she shouted before standing and running for the doors.

Chapter Two

Excerpt from THE WATCHTOWER' – underground manuscript broadsheet printed and produced by unknown subversive elements at the Sorenson Academy. Document seized: 18.4.98 New Church Calendar.

DROP-OUTS?????

What's going on?? Has everyone taken leave of their senses?? Or have they just taken leave?

Watch your fellow brothers. Watch them carefully. You might never see them again.

Has anyone else noticed how our numbers seem to be shrinking?

The esteemed scribes at The Watchtower have been informed of at least three cases of the Academy's brightest and best who have failed to arrive for breakfast over the last two months.

(Note to the kitchen: we've told you about that salt! Don't you understand? Nobody likes it!!)

Assuming that foul feeding time is not the reason for the abrupt absences, it must be foul play.

The three students: Br Body, Br Haw and Sr Arnold, were all devoted Tower worshippers, Br Body in the Dep of Medicine, Sr Arnold in the Dep of Environmental Engineering and Br Haw of Bio-Technology. None knew each other and all were head of their classes. They all retired to their cells, bidding their soon to be ex-companions goodnight, and were never seen or spoken of again.

So why and where did they go?

Our respected Academy administrators are calling it sudden illness but, much as we have faith in their benevolence, don't they always?

We've heard of downsizing but this is ridiculous. So, be careful. First Br Robeson and now this.

We, of course, will risk life, limb and funding to uncover the truth behind this mounting conspiracy.

Just remember, beloved Brothers, keep looking over your shoulder.

They're coming!!

You're next!!

Whatever it was, it was big. Tegan placed her hand on the plexiglass panel and watched the cloudy imprint grow on its cold surface. Outside, stars were glowing against their perpetual black backdrop.

Whatever type of structure she was in stretched down to a planet's surface far below. Which meant it must be hundreds of miles high. Tegan had never been inside anything like it. Looking up, the space station, if that was what it was, stretched an equally dizzying distance out to the stars, completely straight, going on as far as she could see.

She turned away. Such perspectives did funny things to her mind. She had to keep her concentration on what she had come out here to do.

She hoped she wouldn't lose the TARDIS. It was one hundred yards behind her, already half-hidden round a long, slow curve. She was in an access tunnel as broad as a house. Weak strip-lights glowed in gantries far above. Metal tracks ran along the length of the tunnel, wide enough for a train – presumably the most feasible way to traverse this gigantic structure. Doors peppered the inner wall, none bearing indications of where they might lead. They opened easily enough but so far Tegan was too worried about getting lost to try them.

Funnily enough, to her at any rate, all she could think about was how much this... this space column must have cost. More than she wanted to think. And what was it for?

The air was cool, cold even, but she realised that if there was a life-support system there must be life for it to support. Which meant help for the Doctor.

Probably best to head in the planet direction. Down instead of up.

She thought briefly about going back to tell Nyssa where she was going but decided matters were too urgent. Until a train turned up, she was going to keep walking.

Why couldn't Tegan ever tell her where she was going? This tunnel, it gave her no clues. Nyssa felt her initial decisiveness deserting her. She looked out at the stars. Utterly unfamiliar. If Tegan was right about the co-ordinates, they were pushing the boundaries of their usual time/space parameters. Thirty thousand plus years from twentieth-century Earth, at the edge of their universe. And then this great, unbelievable space station. She felt uncomfortably small in the face of such absolutes. Why had the Doctor brought them here?

Certainly, this structure was incredible. Nyssa marvelled at the determination that would have built this. It must have taken centuries. What was it for?

She realised she was pacing along the corridor. Distances were deceptive in such a long, straight tunnel. The TARDIS already seemed a long way away. Might as well keep going. If Tegan was heading away from the planet, as she was, then they would meet. If not, they doubled their chances of finding help. At least, Nyssa hoped it was help they would find. She was less happy about the nagging thought that they might also find whatever was pummelling the Doctor's mind.

Walking was better than thinking, so Nyssa kept going.

COURIER LINK. CODE PRIMUS DELIVERY.

Archetryx rec'd: 05:20 23.04.98 NCC.

Operative Zero to Grand Council of Cardinals.

Message reads:

'Zeta Project on-line. Deadline accepted. Congratulations, gentlemen. In six months you will have your Energy Tower.'

The Doctor awoke with a start. Whatever he had done had worked, at least temporarily. His head was clear for the first time in weeks. Now what had he been doing?

'Tegan? Nyssa?'

He had the feeling they weren't going to answer. The TARDIS had landed somewhere, the rotor still. He was lying on the floor again. Something soft under his head. Nyssa's jacket.

'Interesting,' he muttered to himself. 'Can't remember a thing. Obviously had to blank the memory. I wonder why.'

He thought for a moment. It hit him. Black wave, black shadow, no escape. He stopped thinking. It was still in him. Better not to try.

'First things first.' He stood up, still feeling dizzy. 'I wonder where they've got to.'

Nyssa found a hatch in the tunnel. Open. Obviously she was leaving one section for another. No markings, except a red triangle by the hatch keypad.

Perhaps she ought to go back. If the rest of this place was as deserted as this section she was wasting her time going on.

Anyway, she had a feeling about this space station. A feeling that she wasn't alone. It felt alive. Watching her. Something behind the thousands of panels of plexi-glass, neo-electrical circuitry, metal and strip-lighting, as if enough of it caused some kind of critical mass and cooked up a new life.

Perhaps it had already swallowed Tegan up. The two of them could have wandered around for years in this place without meeting.

She decided to get back to the TARDIS.

As she turned she saw a shape up ahead. A blanket or something thrown on to the floor. So, someone might be here after all.

She walked through the hatch, half-expecting it to close. No. It stayed open.

This was no blanket. This was a man.

Well, whatever was left of a man, draped in a cloak.

Steeling herself, Nyssa pulled the cloak away.

He was dressed in some sort of uniform: a white tunic encased in plate-metal armour. A slim helmet lay next to the body. A sword lay sheathed across his belt.

The man must have died months ago. The body was wizened, mummified. Yellow teeth grinned at her, dry lips drawn back. Brown bony fingers reached upwards towards the inner wall. Even the eyes were dry, sunken into their sockets.

Suddenly, the tunnel didn't seem so empty. The metal tracks in the floor could have been vibrating, as if something was approaching. lights flickered out through the transparent panels: the cold stars looking in. The silence was so complete, she thought she could hear the dead whispering.

'Tegan?' she asked hopefully.

This was no good. She had to get herself under control.

As best she could, Nyssa attempted to ascertain the cause of death. Perhaps it had some bearing on the Doctor's case.

No obvious wounds or burns. Just as if he'd dropped down dead. The eyes of the skull stared at her. It seemed to know something, to beckon her. She felt proximity to something she never wanted to discover. *Come closer*, it seemed to say, *I'll tell you what happened. It's not that bad. I'll just whisper it in your ear.*

'No!' she shrieked and backed away. The dry eyes still stared.

She forced herself to calm down. It was her imagination. No one was watching her. Just turn yourself round, get back to the TARDIS and wait for Tegan or the Doctor to wake up because although nothing was happening this was a bad place and when you're in a bad place all you can do is leave...

Which was when the hatch behind her slid shut and locked itself.

Bizan, a private in the Cardinal Guards, didn't want to be here. Ironic really, as he had spent most of his time in the service attempting to gain this posting to the great *Torre del Oro* of Morestra. And only a year before its inauguration. It would have been something to tell his children in his old age, the way that soldiers were supposed to. He could have died happy in the knowledge that he was here at the most glorious event in history. He could have died happy.

Now he was just going to die.

They hadn't told him that the Energy Tower was death. *Torre de las Muertas*.

They didn't mention the patrols that went missing, the strange black ships that were rumoured to dock in remote parts of its hull, depositing unholy and unwitnessed cargoes. There was even a rumour that the Tower itself had grown so big it had suddenly become alive and was systematically ridding itself of the infesting humans that lived inside it. Blasphemy perhaps, but who was to say it wasn't true?

No, if he had the opportunity, he would travel back in time to that foolish eager young cadet who so desperately wanted this posting and cut off his thumb to prevent him getting it. And to the Dark Gods with the fireside tales.

'Bizan! Wake up!' yelled Serjeant Petallie as the rest of the squad unloaded the concrete. The Track-Cart horses

whinnied and kicked, sending up dust. Bizan nodded and stared fearfully up the endless, intestinal access tunnel. They were too far out, too far from the barracks. It had taken two weeks for them to reach this far, which meant two weeks from help.

It would suit Bizan just fine if he never saw or heard of the great Energy Tower ever again.

New orders. Seal up the corridors on the lower half of Red Sector. Now, what sense did that make? Red Sector was nothing. Part of the internal power units. Nothing to do with the huge generator at the planet end, or the dimensional operators at the other. Rumours of Scientist infiltration, they said. Seal them in. Let them starve to death. Easier than looking for them. Made sense. Simple.

Except that for Bizan, with his three years' service behind him, nothing in the Church was simple. He reckoned something had gone seriously wrong. Well, after two thousand years of building nothing was going to turn out the way it was originally intended, was it? Some of these sections were over a century old and visited – what, maybe twice in that time. Truth was, *Torre del Oro* was bigger than anyone could conceive, so there could be anything inside it.

'Bizan! I told you to wake up!'

'Yes, Serjeant.'

Wearily, Bizan raised his rifle. He looked. Still nothing was racing down the corridor towards him. Behind him the men were ready to raise the concrete blocks. The air was heavy and humid. Most of them, including Bizan, had removed their heavy plate armour and were working in their hair shirts.

'Right, step back,' said Petallie.

Bizan and Trask, the other watchman, moved inside the hatch, back into Yellow Sector. Sweating soldiers unloaded the blocks from the Track-Cart and began ferrying them along to the opening.

'Right, men,' said Petallie, 'this is the only way into Red Sector, so let's seal it up good and proper. And if anyone's in there, let's make sure they *stay* in there.'

Blah, blah, blah, thought Bizan. He leaned against a concrete block, staring up at the soon-to-be-sealed-off corridor ahead of him.

Three men hauling the concrete with leather straps slowly manoeuvred the first block into position.

Which was when Bizan saw the woman walking towards him.

For a second, he thought he was seeing things. The Tower had got to him. It had to be an illusion. A woman!

Not only that but a nearly naked woman! You could see her legs!

She was short, with even shorter reddish-brown hair. What clothes she wore were tight and bright. She had to be a demon. Bizan realised he was shaking. Instinctively, he grasped the icon dangling from a chain round his neck, a brass effigy of *Torre del Oro*.

It wasn't an illusion, or if it was he wasn't alone in witnessing it. The men around Bizan had stopped working and were staring at the woman. Their mouths were open in shock.

'Get moving! What's going on?' shouted Petallie, his voice tailing off as he too saw what was coming down the tunnel.

'S-Serjeant,' squealed Bizan. The air popped with the bolts of rifles.

The woman had seen them now and stopped. She raised her arms. 'Wait!' she shouted. 'I need help' Her accent was unfamiliar, harsh and angular.

'Stay where you are!' barked Petallie, leaping in front of the squad. He may be an idiot, thought Bizan, but he's a brave one.

Wearily, the woman raised her hands.

Her name was Tegan, apparently. Men were finding excuses to walk past her as they completed the blocking of the tunnel. The air was now thick with dust and everyone was coated in fine white powder.

Bizan had never seen a woman like her. Certainly not on his home planet, his dreary little farm far away in the Gamma System. The women on his planet were plump, drab and hardened to their life of work and breeding. This one had to be a royal. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a woman.

'How did you get here?' asked Petallie. Bizan could see that beneath his professional exterior, he was just as affected by her presence as everyone else.

'I told you, we arrived in our... spaceship.' Her voice was petulant, bossy even. No women in the Morestran Empire spoke like this.

‘We?’

‘One of my friends is ill. Up there.’ She gestured to the tunnel. The last concrete block was being pushed into place, the mortar applied. ‘Let me go if you’re not going to help, before you seal him up. He needs help.’ Something seemed to occur to her. ‘Why are you sealing it up anyway? What’s going on?’

Petallie licked his lips, as if he’d been waiting his whole life to say it. ‘I’m asking the questions.’

‘But the Doctor...’

‘What doctor?’

‘My friend, the Doctor. The one who’s ill, remember?’ Her tone had changed, sarcastic Bizan couldn’t keep his eyes off her.

‘Perhaps she means *il Dottore*,’ he offered, as a joke. A couple of men caught the comment and gave him a grateful laugh.

‘What does that mean?’ Tegan snapped angrily.

Bizan quivered beneath her gaze. ‘The Doctor. A joke.’

Petallie bit his thumb at Bizan. ‘You’re supposed to be on guard, layabout.’

‘Sorry, Serjeant.’

‘What did he mean, a joke?’ asked Tegan.

Petallie gave her his best condescending smile, usually reserved for exceptionally dim-witted privates. A smile Bizan knew of old.

‘You know,’ said the Serjeant. ‘The Doctor. I suppose you travelled here in a big blue box that appeared out of thin air.’ The laughter was general now, breaking two weeks of tension.

‘We did,’ said Tegan, obviously confused. ‘It’s up there. Go and look.’

They stopped laughing.

‘She’s touched,’ whispered Bizan. ‘Out of her mind.’

‘What’s going on here?’ demanded Tegan.

‘Everybody, shut up.’ Petallie was worried. He thought for a moment. He was staring at Tegan like she was about to bite him. ‘Bizan, get the communicator pack. I’m calling in the patrol ship. Let’s get her out of here.’

Report: Ferdinand V to Imperial Offices –

Code registered RED – Nobles of Princely Rank and above

ONLY. Report delivered: 11-17 Morestran Capital Time. NCC 16.04.1998.

Official Scribe: Mouser

Termination expedited post-transcript. HA. 16.04.98.

Most Noble Lord,

I apologise for the brevity of this report but I have some interesting developments concerning the Zero Man. First, however, I must apologise for the unavoidable situation concerning our most esteemed informant, the Monsignor du Carallan. His suicide was surprising and without precedent. I had judged the man too cowardly for such an act and therefore mistakenly allowed him the opportunity to use the wooden spoon for his meals. I won't go into details but the Monsignor's inventive method for dispatching himself with the object is worthy of record.

I can only infer that such an uncharacteristic act was a direct result of the area of questioning I was leading him into. I was unaware that he would react so violently. I wanted to know why Kristyan Fall had been released, when all interested parties presumed him dead. With the Energy Tower due to go on-line within the year it did seem clear that there was some connection between the two.

On a more speculative note, although I believe it to be of great relevance, I would like to know why our great mother Church is playing down the switching on of Torre del Oro. After two thousand years I think I would have expected more of an overt celebration. I am aware that the completion date has always been kept secret from the common population of the empire, but the humility at the moment of their greatest triumph seems almost grotesque. Has something gone wrong? Has Kristyan Fall been released in order to oversee the completion of the Tower?

My Lord, I believe, as I always have, that the answer lies at the Academy. I would like you to reconsider my request to reopen the Robeson investigation.

In my opinion, something has gone seriously wrong and if we strike quickly it could be the opportunity we have been looking for to end their power once and for all.

I am, as ever, your loyal servant.

There was only one way and that was forward. She couldn't get the hatch open. Stepping over the body, Nyssa kept walking along the wide, echoing tunnel.

There was a difference here, something new. She thought she could hear a humming sound, like a low-level generator. There was also dirt on the walls and doors, as if this section was used to heavy work. The temperature had shot up and she found pools of water and mould between the railway tracks. Great chains hung from the gantries in the ceiling.

Whatever it was disturbing her, however, was not to be found in the physical aspects of the tunnel. There was an atmosphere, something that made her feel sick. Not a smell – not even the body of the dead knight had smelt. Something else, something that pervaded the atmosphere, more subtle than a clumsy odour. The feeling tickled away at her senses, as if hiding.

Metal clattered behind her. She spun round. 'Tegan?'

She stood still. It felt like hours. The sound was not repeated.

She decided to keep going.

Another noise, again from behind. No mistake.

This time, Nyssa selected a door on the inner wall and stood in front of it. A corridor, leading away. She stepped in, just close enough to prevent it sliding shut.

Someone was walking up the rails after her. She was going to wait, risk a quick look to see what it was, then run down this new corridor as fast as she could. She'd had enough of the tunnel anyway.

Footsteps echoed on the metal tracks. She heard laboured breathing. Not yet, not yet. Not for the first time she reflected that half her life with the Doctor seemed to be spent doing this sort of thing and wished they'd land on wide open spaces a bit more often. Or preferably in the centre of large, friendly cities.

The noise had stopped. A shadow stretched out in the corridor. It seemed vaguely humanoid. Nyssa held her breath.

She caught a glimpse of striped trousers, the long coat and the hat just before hands from behind clapped over her mouth and the door slid shut.

'Nyssa?' said the Doctor. He just spotted the door closing but couldn't be sure whether she had been there or not. He jogged up and watched it open. No one.

'Hmm,' he muttered. First that hatch and now this.

He decided to keep walking.

He had been as impressed as anyone with this massive structure and although he had uneasy ideas about what it might be for, he wanted evidence to confirm those ideas. He also wanted to find Nyssa and Tegan, who seemed to have run off looking for help.

The Doctor was still hazy about the events of the last few hours but he had read the co-ordinates on the TARDIS computer and knew he was in the Morestran Empire. Why he had come he didn't know but clearly the mental breakdown he'd been apparently suffering had something to do with it. Perhaps it concerned his previous encounter with the Morestrans. He was never too sure about events in previous incarnations.

The Morestrans. A rum bunch, as he remembered. Out at the edge of the universe, a long way into the future; an empire almost entirely cut off from its Earth origins both spatially and temporally, retaining and augmenting its prevailing culture.

He had felt that there was always something tragic about their situation – tragic, in the poetic sense. Hadn't they been running out of power?

That low throb he had discerned was growing in intensity. There was something familiar about it, something he couldn't put his finger on. He felt faintly nauseous, nothing like he'd felt in the TARDIS but enough to be disconcerting, to take the edge off the concentration.

He came to a door and walked into it when it failed to open. 'Ouch,' he muttered to himself as he rewired the crude keypad. The door opened with a swish.

He went through and found himself on a metal gantry running the rectangle round a large storage area. Looking down, he saw plastic barrels, hundreds of them, crammed in together.

The Doctor dropped down the frame ladder and went up to a barrel. It was pressure-sealed. Red triangles had been stencilled on to the side.

'I hope this isn't what I think it is,' he said, looking round for the inevitable guard to stop him doing what he didn't really

want to do. His voice was grave, deadly serious. No one appeared.

He sighed and began work. Within seconds he had pulled away the hardened seals. He gripped his fingers round the rubberised ring at the top of the barrel and yanked. The lid snapped open. He threw it to the floor, dismayed by what he was seeing.

‘Oh no.’

The barrel was stuffed with dull brown crystals.

‘What are you doing to me?’ Tegan yelled as the soldiers held her tightly in their nervous grips. The horses were snorting and stamping up dusty air, mirroring their misgivings about the woman. She struggled, making the animals’ agitation worse. Through the plexi-glass, the patrol ship banked and drifted towards the hull.

‘Bizan,’ hissed Bellarius, a private and Bizan’s best friend, ‘what do you think?’

Bizan, flattered that his fellow had asked his opinion, appeared to ponder greatly.

‘She came out of Red Section, right?’ he stated slowly, after some thought.

Bellarius nodded. Bizan continued. ‘The very section that our patrols have been going into and not coming back.’

‘Yeah, so?’

Well, actually, that was all Bizan had really concluded about the matter but he couldn’t stop now. Too many guards had stopped to listen.

He beckoned them forward with his gauntleted finger. They leaned closer, conspirator style. ‘Something’s going on.’

A pause. The soldiers nodded. They walked away, muttering to themselves, impressed.

Bizan was edgy. If truth be told, Bizan was terrified. The fact that a woman was on the Energy Tower filled him with religious dread. The fact that she was beautiful made it worse.

Personally, he thought Petallie should have her put to the sword, to see if she could be affected by mortal weapons. And if she died, well, that’s what you get for wandering around holy places frightening those who were its most faithful servants. He made the sign of the Tower and averted his eyes from her bare legs.

‘Right, out the way. They’re ready for her.’ Petallie, giving orders again.

Bizan gratefully acted on the order and moved away as far as he could, leaning against the newly built concrete wall. It felt warm and comforting.

Carefully, Petallie and the guards led her to the centre of the tunnel, between the rails. Bizan discovered a new-found admiration for his Serjeant as he stood so near to what was quite clearly a devil witch of the Dark Gods.

Petallie nodded to the communicator op, who barked a few words into the microphone attached to the bulky pack. Petallie dropped the rope and stood away.

Tegan appeared confused as she stood alone in the middle of the tunnel, the soldiers staring at her. She stared back and Bizan was convinced she was giving him the evil eye. He hoped it wasn’t a curse.

He was extremely relieved when the lights of the patrol ship dematerialisation beam swirled around her and faded her away. He was sweating like a pig.

Bizan had never seen a dematerialiser before. Not bad for a machine over fifteen hundred years old. The warmth of the block behind him was soothing after his fright. He pushed himself further into the stone. He felt as if he might melt out of his body and all the way back through the concrete.

Petallie was barking again. Bizan watched, as if on another planet. The Serjeant’s voice was muffled, like he was wearing a mask. ‘All right, come on! Show’s over. Let’s get packed and out of here.’ Bizan saw him look upwards, perhaps thinking about the girl.

Men began throwing the equipment back on to the Track-Cart. Bizan found he couldn’t move.

‘Bizan!’ bellowed Petallie.

‘Oww!!’ shouted Bizan suddenly. His back burned. It wasn’t the girl that had made him sweat. The concrete blocks were hot! There came a noise from the other side. A noise like an animal. A noise that was going to haunt Bizan for a very long time. He forced himself to push away from the concrete blocks. His mind seemed to slide back into his head. He felt confusion and cold fear.

Something was burning its way through the wall.

‘Get on the cart!’ bellowed Petallie. ‘Now!’

For the first time in his career, Bizan obeyed an order as quickly as humanly possible. He ran to the Track-Cart, threw

his rifle at Bellarius and clambered aboard. He wasn't aware that he was screeching.

Whips cracked and the Track-Cart began to move. Hooves clattered on the metal rails but not loudly enough to cover the roaring coming from the disintegrating wall.

Bizan was praying.

Chapter Three

Transcript: received Imperial Offices –
Code registered RED – Nobles of Princely Rank and above
ONLY. Report delivered: 18-45 Morestran Capital Time. NCC
27.07.1998.

Official Scribe: Eller.

Termination expedited post-transcript. HA. 27.07.98.

Ho = His Most Noble Imperious Majesty the Lord of the Host
Systems Hippolito.

F = Special Operative #657 Ferdinand V.

TRANSCRIPT READS:

Ho: Once again, Ferdinand, greetings. Your calls are always
welcome. How is your little task coming along?

F: Satisfactorily, My Lord. The information supplied by our
friend the late Monsignor continues to prove fruitful.

Ho: Ah! What scraps have you got for me this time?

F: I've managed to obtain information on a number of names
supplied by the Monsignor concerning the supposed release
of Kristyan Fall.

Ho: And what have you discovered?

F: That many of the names, high-ranking Church officials,
appear to have dropped out of their official duties over the
last two to three years. Although they retain their titles,
deputies have been appointed to run their day-to-day
matters. Many are not even to be found in their parishes.

Ho: So how are they spending their time?

F: As far I as can tell, ferrying between their home systems
and Archetryx in large cargo vessels supposedly designed for
servicing the Energy Tower. Why, I regret, I do not yet know.
However, we have made one discovery which I am unhappy
to inform you of.

Ho: Which is?

F: Not all of these vessels are Church-owned. We have confirmation that at least two of them belong to the Imperial House of Angelo.

Ho: You're certain of this?

F: Absolutely.

Ho: I see. What would you like to do next?

F: I would like your permission to interview the Duke Angelo.

Ho: You realise what you are asking? The Angelo family is one of the oldest and most powerful in the empire.

F: I do and know that if you are sincere about finding out what Fall is up to, and bringing disrepute to the Church, you should allow me to go ahead.

Ho: One day your presumption will get you into trouble, Ferdinand. Don't let your own obsession with bringing down the Church lead you into trouble.

F: I know what I'm doing.

Ho: I hope so. Very well. Bring in the Duke, but for the Dark Gods' sake, be discreet.

F: I will. Thank you, My Lord.

Ho: Hmm. Just keep me informed. I want to know everything.

The Doctor had returned to the outer corridor. He was suddenly in a rush.

Through the window he saw the spaceship. It was so similar to the long-range probe ship all those years ago.

He began to thump at the window. 'Come back!' he yelled. 'What are you doing?'

The Morestran ship, battered and ancient, spun to the left then turned its back on the Doctor. It sped out into space.

'No, no, no,' the Doctor whispered to himself. They couldn't be doing it all again. They couldn't.

A noise, from the corridor. He turned, expecting the worst.

Instead, it was a man, thin and rangy, brown Science Service uniform. He was bearded and his eyes betrayed his fear. Not surprising, with what was on board.

The man was holding a pistol.

'No!' shouted Nyssa, appearing from the shadows. 'This is the Doctor.'

'Nyssa,' said the Doctor, 'I'm so glad to see you again. How did we end up here?'

'There's no time for this,' said the bearded man, 'we've got to get moving.'

‘Of course. Now, who’s going to tell me why there is enough anti-matter on this space station to destroy this galaxy three times over?’

The bearded man ignored him, and kept to the shadows. He beckoned the Doctor and Nyssa to follow, leading them through a door and along a series of corridors, all marked with the red triangle. Every time the Doctor tried to speak, the bearded man would shut him up, waving them on with his pistol. Whispering, he did manage to get the man’s name from Nyssa. Petya. A Scientist.

At last, Petya led them to a metal ladder and began scaling it. He disappeared up into black shadows.

‘It’s all right,’ said Nyssa. ‘I’m glad you’re better.’

‘Thing is, Nyssa,’ the Doctor replied, ‘I’m not so sure I am. After you.’

They climbed into something that looked like a nest – once, reasoned the Doctor, it must have been a compartment. The ceiling was low and the walls lined with sealant. Wrappers from equipment and food packs were strewn in a great circle around grubby mattresses and rucksacks. Boxes of pistol ammunition were stacked against a portable refrigeration unit.

Petya pulled up the ladder and dropped a heavy plastic panel over the space. On one of the rucksacks, another man was staring at them. He was even paler than Petya and the Doctor could see he was sick.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘He’s dying,’ replied Petya, in his gloomy monotone. ‘Redler. Dimensional engineer. Been like this since the third day.’

Redler stared up at the Doctor. He looked scared. ‘Can you help me?’ he asked.

‘I can try,’ the Doctor replied, but in his hearts he was doubtful.

‘They’re some sort of infiltration group,’ said Nyssa. ‘Come to find out about the Energy Tower.’

‘Energy Tower?’ asked the Doctor.

Petya laughed grimly.

‘Have I said something funny?’

‘You sound like you don’t know where you are.’

‘Well, to tell the truth, I don’t. I seem to have developed some kind of acute amnesia.’

‘Nyssa told me you were the Doctor.’

'I am.'

Petya shook his head. 'Then three weeks in this place is finally getting to me.'

'He is,' said Nyssa. 'I don't understand.'

Petya went back to his packing. 'Look, I don't really care who you say you are. I don't have much time. The scout ship gets here in six degrees and nothing is stopping me leaving.'

'The Energy Tower?' the Doctor repeated.

'The great scheme. The wonderful device that will save the empire and provide the power to stop the Dark Gods breaking through. The legend finally brought to life. After two thousand years.'

The Doctor moved over to Redler. The sick man lay back. The Doctor leaned over and pulled up an eyelid. 'How did you get like this?'

Redler dropped his head on to the mattress. His voice was strained, choked almost. 'Third day. Hardel and I were scouting. We found the chamber and went in to take a look. I must have been... been poisoned.'

'Chamber?'

'Up about three levels. We couldn't work it out. They had some kind of energy source in there. It was glowing. Hardel was fascinated. He went there every day to monitor it. I don't know why. Then he disappeared and I went to look for him.'

'And that's when you were exposed to the anti-matter.'

Redler looked at Petya. 'What do you mean?'

Petya reached over to the Doctor. 'What do you know about anti-matter?'

'Only that it's on this Tower. In quantity. Which makes its position extremely precarious. How have you managed to get it off Zeta Minor?'

Nyssa seemed curious. 'Doctor?'

The Doctor sat up, staring at the two men 'I think you'd better tell me why you're here.'

Petya paused. A ghost of a smile danced round his lips. 'If you were really *il Dottore*, you'd know.'

A crease of frustration appeared on the Doctor's face. 'Can we forget this Doctor business for a moment? I don't have much time and I think this Energy Tower of yours is the key to some of my own problems. So, you tell me what I want to know, then perhaps I can help.'

'All right, what do you want to know?'

‘Let’s start with who you are and what you’re doing here. Let’s pretend... let’s pretend we’ve just dropped in out of nowhere and need to be told everything.’

Petya picked up a metal flask. He seemed to be considering what to tell them. He stuffed it into his rucksack. ‘We’re from the Cult of Science. I’m a structural physicist.’

‘What’s...’

‘Nyssa. Please. See if you can make Redler here comfortable.’

‘It was the appointed time. Two thousand years of Morestran subservience to the Church’s great scheme. Every man, woman and child working towards completion, the resources of every planet in the empire swallowed up to build this thing. *Torre del Oro*, the Tower of Gold.’

‘It’s an impressive structure.’

‘It’s a symbol of oppression. The Church’s way to hold absolute power for millennia. You know, in my opinion it was never designed to actually work. The old lie: give us everything and in the end you can have a brave new empire in a new golden age. Just a big, expensive con.’

The Doctor touched the metal floor. ‘The Tower of Babel. Someone actually built it.’ He looked up. ‘So what went wrong?’

‘The time was up. The Energy Tower is due for completion within a year. And everyone in the empire is waiting for their reward for all those centuries of self-sacrifice. So the Church has to deliver. And then, just as we expected those vultures to start gloating, to show off their toy, everything went quiet. Suddenly no one could get near the thing. They sealed off the entire Omega System.’

‘Did you say Omega System?’

‘Yes. Omega Major was the planet selected for the grounding of the Tower. Why?’

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘The irony... It’s nothing. Please continue.’

‘As I said. No word, no nothing. It was as if all work had shut down. Oh yes, they kept feeding us the official line that everything would be fine and the Tower would be open for business at the allotted time but we knew something was wrong. We were sent to find out what it was.’

The Doctor was watching Petya very closely. ‘You’re a scientist, you say.’

‘That’s right.’

'I see. And what did you find out?'

'Nothing. We'd been here a week and the place was totally deserted. Oh yes, there were patrols, the Cardinal Guards, but they're pretty stupid. As for any actual work, well, there was nobody. Months before switch-on time, this place should be teeming with people.'

'Then you found the anti-matter.'

'Not quite. A ship arrived. We'd been hiding up in the dimensional control section wondering where everybody was. I saw the ship dock and we traced it here. It took us two days to reach this place. By the time we arrived it was empty again. Except for storage rooms full of barrels and the chamber, which Redler and Hardel started to investigate. Another week and another three ships. They unloaded more barrels.'

'Who?'

'I don't know. They weren't Church men. Wore black uniforms. Looked dangerous. We didn't confront them. It was a quick operation, unloading the barrels, feeding some into the chamber. I think they realised someone had been poking around but they never came looking for us. Just left, as quickly as they could.' Petya's tone darkened. 'And then we found the bodies.'

The Doctor felt his skin tighten. 'What sort of bodies?'

Nyssa looked up from tending Redler. 'I saw one myself. I couldn't understand why he was dead. He was... was all dried up. Like he'd been dead for months.'

The Doctor's voice was low, deadly serious. 'Except he hadn't, had he?'

Petya slowly shook his head.

'What do you mean?' asked Nyssa.

'I've got an uncomfortable feeling I know what happened to your friend Hardel I think we'd better take a look at this chamber.'

Petya was clipping his rucksack closed. 'Not me. I'm getting out. I'm not missing that ship.'

Nyssa stood up in the cramped compartment. 'What about your friend?'

Petya looked away. 'We knew there would be risks. Some of us were bound not to make it.'

'But we could help him.'

'You were sent here to do a job. Don't you want to complete your mission?' asked the Doctor.

'You don't understand.' Petya seemed feverish, sweating. 'You haven't been here. I hear things. Noises.'

'You must let me see this chamber.'

'When it gets dark. I once found a whole patrol... eight men. It got all of them. There's something out there, wandering the corridors, looking for me... well, I'm not going to give it the chance. Out of my way.' Petya raised the revolver.

'Don't be stupid,' insisted Nyssa. 'We want to help you.'

'Like I said, I'm leaving.'

The Doctor raised his arms, fists bunched. 'Trust me.'

'Why should I?'

'Because I've got something here that might help your friend.' He held out his hands. Lying in his palms were some dull brown crystals.

'How can they help?' Petya was suspicious, not wanting to trust him.

Nyssa stared at the crystals. 'What are they?'

'I think Redler knows what they are. Look.'

The sick man was trying to sit up, eyes fixed on the crystals.

'Anti-matter,' the Doctor continued. 'Picked it up in the storage area. Dormant at the moment. They can stabilise his condition. For a while.'

'Please,' whispered Redler hoarsely. The Doctor held out the crystals to him and slowly dropped them into his upturned hands. Redler clutched at them and fell back. He held them to his body, as if they were radiating heat. Petya stared, then lowered the gun. He nodded.

'We haven't much time,' said the Doctor. 'Nyssa, would you watch him? There's still a chance.'

'What's wrong with him?'

'No time to explain. I don't think the irradiation is too advanced. You'll know if he develops a distaste for the crystals that something's going wrong. Would you stay?'

Nyssa nodded, without hesitation. 'I'll do what I can.'

'If anything happens, anything, promise me you'll get away from him.'

'What could happen?'

'Promise me.'

'Of course.'

'Right.' The Doctor clapped his hands. 'Petya, let's take a look at this chamber.'

Fr Confessor Similus of the most holy vessel *Sagrada* was brought from his bed straight to the materialisation section. As he rushed through the ship's cramped corridors he knew it had to be serious. Nobody ever trusted the transmat system any more. He'd only ever known this ship use it once.

As Father Confessor on this ship which patrolled the Energy Tower, his job was mainly confined to updating security dossiers and spreading spite about the crew, who, unfortunately, had proved a very pious and loyal bunch. He liked his job and was always energised by the permanent sight of *Torre del Oro* whenever he looked out of the window. It made him feel important.

He tightened his belt and pulled his confessor's hood over his head. The Captain had tried to dissuade him from wearing his full robes on the ship but Similus felt it part of his duty that he create an intimidating presence. The hood also helped him avoid eye contact with any members of the crew he declared a traitor to the Church and had deported for exile. Besides, it may be that an important personage had just arrived on board and he didn't want to make any mistakes.

As it turned out, it was a woman. A woman dressed in the most blasphemous costume of which he could conceive. He felt his face reddening in witness of her shame.

'What's going on?' he asked the Captain.

'She just appeared on the Tower. They've sent her over to us.' The Captain, despite his authoritative appearance, was an unreconstructed buck-passer who, although excellent at his job, seemed to spend most of his time manipulating his next promotion. 'And I'm handing her over to you for a full confession.'

And with that he stomped off back to the bridge.

Similus stared at the brazen child who stood shivering in the cold metal of the room. Two guards pulled her off the transmat pads.

Similus was about to speak when the girl snapped, 'Get your hands off me! Who do you think you are?'

A bit of spirit. The confession might not be so bad after all. 'Hmm, never done a woman before,' he said, giving her his cold, menacing monotone. 'This way.' He bowed.

MOC SV SAGRADA– 08.09.98 NCC.

Confession log #132 – Confessor presiding: Fr K. Similus (FS).

Subject: Tegan Jovanka. Rank: Non-personnel (TJ).

TJ: Take your hand off my leg.

FS: What were you doing on the Great Tower? You realise that such a blasphemy is punishable by death at the stake, according to Church doctrine concerning...

TJ: I don't know anything about your stupid tower. What's the matter with you people? Why don't you listen?

FS: Very well. If that's the way you want to proceed. I have your confession here. If you'll just sign your name. Note to scribe, I am showing the sinner her confessional document.

TJ: What? I didn't write that!

FS: Of course not. I did. All you have to do is sign it.

TJ: But look at it, I never did those things.

FS: My dear, this is a confession. Of course you're going to say you didn't do them, to claim that you are innocent. That's why I write the confessions.

TJ: But I am innocent. And what's this? 'Impersonating the handmaiden of a divine being'. What's that supposed to mean?

FS: You are claiming to be the handmaiden of *il Dottore*, the 'Sair-Ah' written of in the scriptures? The actual Doctor who is venerated and worshipped as the saviour of the Morestran race?

TJ: Not 'the' handmaiden, 'a' handmaiden.

FS: 'The' Doctor 'who descended into the pit of hell to deliver us from our sins'. Am I right?

TJ: I don't know about that. It's possible I suppose. Why don't we go back to the Tower and ask him? If he's still alive.

FS: I'm a reasonable man. Why don't we come to some arrangement concerning your confession? I could be very nice to you.

TJ: You're fooling yourself. Stop drooling. And while we're at it, how about taking a bath? You stink.

FS: All right then, we'll do it the hard way. You leave me no choice. Note to scribe. I am now showing the sinner the Box of Inescapable Truth. Just a few little toys that ensure a full and frank testimonial. I rather think I'm going to enjoy this.

TJ: Yes, you look like the sort of man who would.

FS: Let's play, shall we?

TJ: All right, all right. You want the truth? Here it is: I travel the universe, throughout Time and Space, with the Doctor, who is a Time Lord over seven hundred years old, in his ship the TARDIS, which is dimensionally transcendental, meaning that it's bigger on the inside than the outside. And I don't know why we've come here at this time, because the Doctor never tells me anything, but it must be something very important because I've never seen him act this way before. The only thing I know is that just before he brought me here he was suffering from nightmares involving some huge disaster and as we seem to have landed in your tower just as you're about to switch it on, well, stupid as you are, you should be able to work out that there must be a connection. So, I reckon you'd better stop wasting time and find him. Unless you are as stupid as I think you are, in which case it's probably too late and you're all going to die. Happy now?

FS: Uhh... uhh...

TRANSCRIPT ENDS.

'Doctor, can I ask you a question?' said Petya, as he led the way through more of these endless corridors.

'Of course,' replied the Doctor.

'Are you really *il Dottore*, the saviour from our legends?'

The Doctor scratched his head. 'How can I answer that? If you're asking me am I the Doctor, the answer is a resounding yes. If you're asking me if I'm some sort of divine being, then I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you. Have you noticed how the lighting here has recently seen some maintenance?'

'Eh?'

'Just confirmation that someone is using this section. Also, these tracks on the floor. Someone's been using heavy equipment. Probably for the barrels.'

Petya looked wistful. 'You know, I was a Church man once. When I was seventeen. Forcibly conscripted to take the vows. But I never believed, not really. That's why I ran away. I never believed in you.'

The Doctor smiled. 'You just keep on not believing in me.'

Petya stopped. He was listening for something. 'Got to be careful. I've stopped coming here, the noises are worst here.'

'Probably what's kept you unaffected.'

Petya stopped at a door. This one was closed, another keypad presumably providing a lock. 'In here.'

The Doctor took a deep breath. This all seemed familiar. Too familiar. Running down a corridor, operating a keypad...

'Before we go in, can I ask *you* a question?' he said.

Petya was suspicious again. His tired eyes looked away. 'All right.'

'You're not a scientist, are you?'

'We're wasting time.' Petya reached for the keypad.

The Doctor grasped his arm. 'When I showed you the crystals you weren't even curious.'

'What do you want from me? I was worried about Redler.'

'And now you're telling me you knew about the anti-matter in the barrels but never went near them.'

'We haven't time for this.' Petya tried to escape the grip but, despite the Doctor's apparent gentleness, he found himself unable to shake him off.

'No,' the Doctor continued. 'The way you move, the way you act. You're some sort of soldier, aren't you?'

Petya pulled himself free. 'All right. All right. When my people found out what the Scientists were planning they were just as curious to find out what had gone wrong with the Tower. I was already in deep cover with the Cult so I was the obvious choice.'

'And who are your people?'

Petya looked at him, apparently bemused. 'Who do you think? The Imperial House. You really don't know anything, do you?'

'Let's just say, my knowledge is somewhat out of date. Shall we go?'

Petya pulled a small black egg-shaped device from his overall pocket. He placed it against the keypad. LEDs flashed over its surface for a few seconds and then it emitted a bleep. The keypad uttered a couple of bleeps in return, then its red 'Closed' light turned to green.

'Rotating combination, randomly altered every ten minutes. Old technology. Very good.' Petya seemed pleased with his little egg. He replaced it quickly.

'Someone wants to keep this door closed,' said the Doctor. The door hissed open.

The strip-lights in here were red. The corridor was short with metal grilles on the floor. A sealed hatch at the far end

was the only door. The hatch was heavily stencilled with yellow and black warnings.

Petya hung back. 'I'd better keep watch,' he said. 'I don't want any nasty surprises. And hurry this up for heaven's sake. The scout ship's here in two degrees.' He failed to keep the fear out of his voice.

The Doctor didn't blame him. The atmosphere in this short corridor was thick with an odd presence. An otherness. Something that didn't belong. He felt the voices from before, the ones he had been fighting off, trying to break through his mental defences. He was close to the source of his visions. Like a tickle in the throat or an itch, they were always there, at the edge of his consciousness.

Strange lights seemed to dance in front of his eyes; colours that seemed out of place, mathematically impossible. The corners of the corridor seemed to be altering themselves, concealing some other reality hidden just out of sight. He forced himself to keep going. He concentrated on the closed observation panel at the top of the hatch. The hinges, the metal plate across the glass.

'Hurry!' snapped Petya, light years away. The Doctor didn't feel that he was walking, more like floating through thick liquid. Concentrate on the panel. The panel.

He was there.

Like back in the TARDIS, he pressed his hands against the reassuring metal. Its cold presence provided tactile reality. Without a thought, he pulled the plate away from the observation panel. A red light, stronger even than the red lights of the corridor, filled his vision.

The idiots, the Doctor thought to himself, the idiots! They've done it, gone back and done it. They found a way.

Inside the chamber, a small plate of powdered anti-matter diffused its glowing power up into a hungry neutron generator.

Redler stirred again on his rough bed. Although the crystals seemed to have appeased him mentally, his body still appeared to Nyssa to be on the verge of collapse. He writhed, caught in the grip of some disturbing dream. His muttering voice was low, racked with pain.

Nyssa willed the Doctor to get a move on. Once again, she felt that there was something he hadn't told her. Something she needed to know.

She found it ironic that she was stuck here, in a tiny little compartment, when all around this sprawling space tower were hundreds of miles of empty corridors. Or perhaps not so empty.

She wondered just precisely how this Energy Tower was supposed to work. Why did it need to be so big? What sort of energy was it supposed to generate?

More importantly, where did this anti-matter fit in? She knew that these crystals shouldn't be able to exist in this universe. Not without a huge release of destructive energy as matter and antimatter cancelled each other out. An explosion beyond the capacity of this structure to survive it. She looked down at the stones clutched in Redler's fist. How could they be here?

Her mind drifted back to Adric. He wasn't supposed to exist in this universe either. And now he didn't. It was funny how she could miss him so much. After all, everything else she knew had also gone. But he was the one who had left the biggest gap in her life.

She reflected that he represented a change in her life with the Doctor. Adric's death proved that none of them was immortal, that the Doctor offered no absolute protection. She supposed that this made their visits more serious, more real. Less... noble, in a way. They didn't exist outside of the run of the universe after all, dropping in to solve other people's problems and then off and running again. They were part of the great unfolding of history. A tiny part in a big machine.

Redler was moaning now. His eyes flicked open.

'Redler,' she whispered, not knowing what else to do. 'Rest. You must rest.'

His face seemed more lined now, his skin coarse and blotched.

She knew that if he had been exposed to active anti-matter then he was lucky to be alive at all – if you could call it luck.

'Curiosity,' said Redler. 'Like the Church says: "Ignorance is good for you."'

'What do you mean?' Nyssa asked. She felt he was trying to hang on to his personality, to stop himself being subsumed. The questions might help.

'I had to look, didn't I? Couldn't leave that chamber alone. Should have stuck to the scriptures. Never try and understand what you're not supposed to know.'

He coughed, and Nyssa heard a distressing hoarseness underneath his voice. Redler's eyes were shining.

'That's silly. It was your job to find out.'

'Ha, we knew what it was when we saw it. We just didn't believe it. Anti-matter,' he sighed, voice full of sarcasm. 'The Crystals of the Dark Gods. With the power to transform men into demons.' He tried a jokey snarl, which again dissolved into coughs. 'Well, for once they were right. The Church, after everything, was right. *Leyenda Negra...*'

'You're no demon. You're ill.'

She poured some water from a canteen into a cup and offered it to him. Suddenly, savagely, he knocked it away. He dropped his head back on to his rucksack pillow. Nyssa caught a red glint in his eye and was suddenly afraid. He whispered something, something Nyssa could barely hear, that might have been, 'Save your servant.'

It was as if someone had entered the compartment. She felt breathless, constricted. The presence, if that was what it was, seemed to pull at her mind, at her life, trying to pluck it from her body. She let out a moan as the invisible force turned her cold. Redler groaned, the sound low and gruff. The feeling subsided. But the presence remained.

Redler was chuckling. He threw the crystals from him, like they were hot. A red shine ringed his eyes.

Nyssa moved away from him. He raised a feeble hand to stop her but she knocked it away in her panic. He tried to rise, still chuckling.

She scurried for the panel, trying to stand, bent over under the low ceiling. Redler's chuckles seemed to be degenerating into almost bestial growls. She avoided looking at him, hearing him crawl across the equipment towards her.

She gripped the panel and tried to haul it open. It was heavier than it looked. Redler's breathing was horribly hoarse, like something was lodged in his throat. Nyssa smelt a warm, sickly scent.

Then it bellowed in her ear. She screamed and his claws brushed against her back. The hatch was opened and she fell through, not even touching the ladder. Something smashed against the ceiling as she hit the metal floor hard. For a moment, she blacked out. Only her will, screaming at her to survive, enabled her to roll clear as Redler dropped straight down after her, eyes aglow and coarse hair bunching from his head.

Forgetting the pain in her back where she had landed, Nyssa forced herself up. No good, she couldn't walk, couldn't even see straight. She glimpsed hair and claws and Redler bellowing, knowing she was dead, about to have the life drained from her, to find out first hand exactly what happened when matter and antimatter collided...

A sound. Technological.

A shot.

Redler screamed and hands were grabbing her. Nyssa struggled but already knew these hands were human. Or Time Lord.

'Get back! Back!' Petya was shouting. He fired again and Nyssa heard that dreadful animal roar once more.

'You can't kill it,' said the Doctor from somewhere. Nyssa found herself hurled across the room and heard a door slide shut.

They were running. The usual corridors. Something animal smashing away at a metal door that wouldn't open.

'So quick,' the Doctor was muttering, 'much quicker than before...'

At last the world made sense again. She was surprised to find herself already at the outer tunnel. The Doctor embraced her breathless in his relief. Petya appeared behind him, pistol still smoking.

'I'm sorry, so sorry,' gabbled the Doctor. 'Are you all right?'

'I – I think so. He just changed. What's happening?'

He held her at arm's length. He took a deep breath. 'We've got to get out of here.'

Chapter Four

⁵⁶ And lo! The Doctor did descend into the great pool of darkness, with Sorenson, who was mighty afflicted by demons, and there did he battle with the Dark Gods.

⁵⁷ Forty days and nights the Doctor fought there, on the other side, against those who would harm him. 'Free this man,' he cried, 'for he will not submit to the will of the evil ones.' And the Dark Gods' power was broken and Sorenson was freed from his spell.

⁵⁸ And when they returned to Salamar and the handmaiden Sair-Ah, who themselves fought those who had come over, the Doctor spake saying,

⁵⁹ 'Listen! I have overcome demons and found their secrets. You, true Morestrans, must be guardians of all the universe. You must harness the movements of the planets and keep this gate into the abyss locked and secret for all time. Sorenson will lead you unto greatness. For though the Dark Ones are banished they can never truly die. They may return once more, when the stars are right. Only the true and faithful Morestrans may sustain the world of light. Build, Morestrans, build! Build the Great Tower of Gold that will lock the gate for ever. And lead your race into eternal glory!'

⁶⁰ Salamar did ponder upon the Doctor's words and pronounced them wise. Sorenson was to be the architect of a new age.

⁶¹ Of the Doctor, none can say. He and Sair-Ah were gone. Only Sorenson knew whence and he spake only of a blue box which although small to unbelievers could contain a thousand faithful souls.

Leyenda Negra, New Testament, Chapter 22, verses 56-61

Ferdinand looked through the peephole into the cell. The Duke Angelo was sitting in there, as calm as if he were waiting for his servants to come and prepare his breakfast. He was tall and handsome, a sixty-year-old, steel-grey-haired man descended from millennia of perfect breeding. Smug. Smug and arrogant.

Steam clouded Ferdinand's spectacles and he removed them before giving them a wipe. This would have to be done carefully.

The snatch had gone well, Harwood intercepting the Duke as he emerged from the imperial court; some sort of lie about trouble with his son. They bundled him into a wagon, blindfolded him and drove across the city, reaching this secret station in the *Barri Gotiq* within an hour. Apparently, the Duke hadn't said a word. Ferdinand could almost feel his resolution: he wasn't going to crack easily.

Ferdinand checked his revolver, then unlocked the door. Harwood gave him a quick nod, his orders: to wait outside.

The Duke gave him nothing more than an arched eyebrow when he entered the cell. Ferdinand sat quietly opposite him at the bare table. There was a long, long pause, neither wanting to speak.

At last, Ferdinand could bear it no more. He was burning up. He knew he had conceded some sort of point but he said, 'Let's not spend more time on this than we have to.'

The Duke inclined his head towards him. His clear blue eyes levelled a cold stare at Ferdinand. A slight sneer appeared on his lips. 'Ferdinand du Vindice,' he stated, his voice betraying the precise, commanding tone of those used only to giving orders. 'The famous zealot. What is it you want?'

'You know what I want.'

'I thought your little mandate stretched as far as smearing Church technophiles. A most apposite task for someone so ridiculous.'

Ferdinand smiled. 'Cheap, Duke Angelo. So early?'

'You do realise what I'm going to do to you for this?' said the Duke, unconcerned.

'A regrettable necessity. You see, I want information and you're the only person who can give me it.'

'I regret, I will disappoint you. Even if I did possess what you desire, do you think I would ever impart it to such a squalid little man as you? To come in here and threaten me with a gun. You really think such presumption will go unpunished?'

Ferdinand smiled cruelly. He touched the revolver on the table in front of him. 'You've heard of me. You must also have heard of my reputation.'

'Your absolute hatred of the Church is well known. And commendable. However, your unpredictable temper and envy of your betters in the imperial houses have led you to the limit of acceptability on more than one occasion. And you know, I rather think that with this outrage you have passed that limit.'

'Why did you give two of your ships to Kristyan Fall?'

The Duke relaxed. He leaned back in his chair and laughed. Loud, good-humoured laughter. Ferdinand was tight, aware of his own lumpen shape and bald pate in comparison with the lean, superior figure in front of him.

'Is that what all this is about?' the Duke said, once his laughter had subsided. 'My dear Ferdinand, what reliable source furnished you with this nonsense?'

'So it's not true?'

'You have to ask? Who do you think I am? I am the Duke of the second most powerful family in the Morestran Empire. I own dozens of planets. My fleet is bigger than the emperor's. Why in heaven's name would I give star ships to a man who has been dead for five years? End this nonsense, while I'm in a good mood.'

'You're lying.'

The Duke stopped laughing. 'How dare you?' he said coldly. 'Let me go.'

'No. Why did you give him the ships?'

'I didn't. Don't be an idiot.'

'Why did you give him the ships? You get one more chance.'

'Don't threaten me, little zealot.'

Ferdinand shot the Duke in the right shoulder. The gunblast rebounded round the room. The Duke toppled backwards in his chair. He stared from the floor at Ferdinand, his mouth moving up and down. Ferdinand saw the perfect white teeth glisten in the light. The cell stank of cordite and burning. The Duke raised his left hand to his wounded shoulder. Blood leaked over expensive Angelo family silk. 'You're a dead man,' the Duke whispered, yellow eyes at last revealing the old man underneath the finery.

Ferdinand launched himself over the table. He jammed the revolver into the Duke's mouth. 'Then I'm a dead man!' he screamed. The Duke's eyes were bulging, threatening to erupt from their sockets. Ferdinand stuffed the revolver in further, bruising the Duke's throat. 'And you know

something?' he bellowed into the Duke's face. 'I don't care any more what you tell me. I'm just going to kill you.'

The Duke writhed under his grip, all dignity gone, just a desperate urge for survival. He moaned, trying to form words. Ferdinand cocked the revolver, seeing the chamber dance its deadly revolve. 'You scum!'

The Duke tried to scream. Ferdinand felt himself shaking, his finger pulling at him to do the deed, to go as far as he could, to get his revenge. Slowly, he removed the gun from the Duke's mouth, his glasses steaming up again. He knew his face would be boiling red.

'I don't know why he wanted them,' the Duke babbled, 'I swear.'

'You're lying!'

'Something to do with the Energy Tower. There's a problem... not enough ships... said he'd expose me... planet ownership deeds... I borrowed Church funds for payoffs... Fall said he'd write them off... I don't know any more... In the name of the gods, I don't know any more!'

Ferdinand hammered his fine teeth with the butt of his gun. The Duke spat blood. 'You do know more! Tell me everything. What's wrong with the Tower?'

'Don't kill me, please.'

'The Tower!'

'Brothers... imperial brothers...'

'Hippolito and Antonio?'

'Sent men to the Tower... infiltration team... undercover... Scientists... find out what's gone wrong. Due back at Imperial Spaceport in a week...'

The Duke went limp underneath Ferdinand. He spat out white fragments.

Ferdinand flicked the hammer of the weapon back into place. He stood up, shaking and sweating, and leaned against the table to get his breath back. The Duke lay on the floor and Ferdinand could see the old composure come back to him. Already the old man looked better than he did, despite the blood.

The Duke put his hand to his lips, his body spasming with pain. He glared, eyes full of hate, at Ferdinand. 'Start running,' he hissed through his broken mouth.

Excerpt from 'THE WATCHTOWER' – underground manuscript broadsheet printed and produced by unknown

subversive elements at the Sorenson Academy. Document seized: 05.10.98 New Church Calendar.

READY OR NOT!!!

Well, here we are, in a state of unadulterated excitement because it's nearly time!!

After two thousand years we're going to harness the kinetic energy derived from planetary movement!

Sounds strange, doesn't it? That word: ready. Aren't you just a little bit scared?

But, and there's always a 'but', we Brother Moles at The Watchtower are just a teensy bit sceptical.

Why have all scheduled flights to the Energy Tower been cancelled? How come students who have worked hard for millennia to produce this great miracle have suddenly been barred from visiting it? What about the final, vital last-minute adjustments?

Once again, our esteemed mentors have informed us that the reason is that there is nothing to be done, that everything is in place, that we need do no more than celebrate.

Fair enough, and pleasant it is to hear. But why then have no classes been cancelled? Why do we still have to toil day in, day out? Where is all our research going??

Is there, perhaps, some problem with the Energy Tower? Surely it will be switched on on time...

Clearly, it's not in our interest to question our elders and betters. On the contrary, we at The Watchtower feel it our duty to help them in any way we can... by finding the truth.

The truth about our disappearing colleagues. The truth about those unmarked, unidentified spaceships that leave in the night. The truth about poor old Br Robeson, whose suicide, although many years back, still remains a mystery.

Have no fear, we are on the case. If the truth is there to be found, we will find it.

Petya kept up his watch at the window. A small box beeped by his side. Nyssa was beginning to doubt whether this rescue ship was real, or just a product of the understandably disturbed man's mind. She sidled up to the Doctor. 'Why don't we just get back to the TARDIS?' she asked. 'Tegan's probably waiting for us. She might be in trouble.'

'Tegan undoubtedly *is* in trouble,' the Doctor replied offhandedly, 'but I don't think I can go back.'

'Why not?'

He turned to her and Nyssa saw the strain etched into his face. 'The presence, lodged in here.' He tapped his head. 'I can't get rid of it. And it's growing stronger. Somehow, the anti-matter on this tower is affecting its intensity. If I can't shift it soon it's going to overwhelm me. I've got to find the answer. Besides, that door won't hold Redler for long. You see, Nyssa, I've had dealings with the Morestrans and anti-matter before, many, many years ago...'

'There!' shouted Petya. Nyssa and the Doctor turned to see a black shape moving slowly towards the Energy Tower, invisible but for the stars it blotted out with its bulk. 'Our stealth ship,' Petya said proudly. 'At last.'

The vessel banked and manoeuvred itself closer to the side of the Tower.

'Come on, come on,' Petya was whispering.

A growling sound up the tunnel stopped him. 'I think your friends ought to get a move on,' said the Doctor.

A man stood up in the distance. He was hunched, his hair falling in filthy locks over his brown uniform. His hands were bunched into claws and Nyssa could see his teeth even from here. A second rose, this one dressed in the armour she had seen before. They had been crawling towards them along the rails.

'Doctor,' asked Nyssa, instinctively backing away, 'what are those things?'

'Anti-men,' he replied, eyes firmly fixed on the approaching creatures. 'Exposure to anti-matter hybridises the genetic structure, regressing the victim back down the evolutionary scale.'

'Forget the science lecture,' snapped Petya. 'How do we kill them?'

'We can't. They aren't alive, not in the way we understand it. We'll have to run.'

Petya was sweating. 'No! If we move we'll miss the ship.'

‘And if we stay they’ll kill us.’

Metal shattered behind them, the other direction. Redler smashing his way into the tunnel.

‘Doctor, we’re going to be trapped,’ said Nyssa, trying to keep calm.

‘I can see that.’

‘Well, what are we going to do?’ Petya’s voice raised an octave, hysteria not far away. ‘We’re so close.’

The anti-men were fast, breaking into a run. Overhead, a strip-light was flickering, breaking up their sprint into a series of strobed tableaux. The door behind them was nearly off its hinges. Redler’s demented voice jabbered hoarsely at them.

‘We have to go back,’ said the Doctor, indicating the nearest corridor.

‘What about the ship?’ screeched Petya.

‘Forget the ship,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘There’s no time.’

The two running creatures roared. Their echoes resounded round the tunnel.

The door crashed open and Redler fell in, howling triumphantly.

Petya snapped off a shot at one of the runners. The anti-man in brown dropped with the impact, ignored by its fellow. It rose, almost comical in its confusion, then started up again. They were less than a hundred yards away.

‘Hardel! It was Hardel! You see that?’ Petya was laughing, tears racing down his face.

‘Petya! Come on!’ yelled Nyssa, heading for the corridor. Redler was creeping closer, a huge grin on his animal face. Petya spun and fired a shot at him. ‘Get back!’

‘Stay there,’ said the Doctor, pushing Nyssa into the corridor. As she hit the wall she saw him lunge for Petya, just as Redler jumped for him. She screamed and the outer wall of the tunnel blew inwards. The Tower rocked as something impacted against the outer hull. A section of hull blew inwards at speed, catching the leaping Redler and cannoning him into the opposite wall with a sickening thud. Showers of sparks and fragments of metal exploded over the Doctor and Petya.

It was the rescue ship.

The smoke cleared and Nyssa saw an airlock burst open with a rush of air. She turned just as the two anti-men reached the Doctor and Petya. Petya pulled himself free of the Doctor’s grip and dived headlong into them, knocking

them over. The creatures shrieked with delight. 'Get on the ship!' he yelled.

The Doctor, dazed, could only stand in the rubble trying to clear his head. Nyssa knew she had to take the initiative. She bundled him towards the airlock.

She heard screaming. For an instant she turned to look and caught a glimpse of Petya firing uselessly into the creatures as their claws did their work. Petya visibly shrank, his face drying. Still, he bellowed at them, 'Come on! Come on!!'

The Doctor seemed to recover, pulling her away as the creatures ripped Petya apart. The airlock clanged shut.

Nyssa held on tight to the Doctor, praying he wouldn't let go, ever. The floor shuddered as the ship detached itself from the hull and drifted away.

She buried her head in the Doctor's fawn coat, not wanting to remember.

Which was how Captain Vishin, in an old blue Space Service uniform, found them when he opened the airlock.

Kristyan Fall was not pleased, on his return to Archetrix, to receive two major pieces of bad news.

The first: Duke Angelo had got himself into a mess, picked up by the Special Investigations Service, a unit given an anti-Church mandate by the two sons of the emperor, Hippolito and Antonio. Arrogant idiot had spilled his guts under interrogation. Breeding didn't seem to be what it was once cracked up to be. However, a situation easily resolved.

The second: more disturbing. Some girl appearing on the Tower, claiming to be the handmaiden of the returning *Dottore*. It made Fall smile to think of this madness, but how had she got in? The Church had sworn that nothing could get through their quarantine, although he knew from the Duke that an Imperium-backed Cult of Science infiltration squad had already punctured that particular pomposity.

As soon as he reached his office, high up in the storm-ridden mountain cloisters, he was reading the transcript of Fr Similus's botched 'interrogation'.

It was clear that this Tegan at least knew something. This was not the ranting of some lunatic. Her story made sense.

Fall wasn't religious but the atmosphere of awe that surrounded this vital moment in Morestran history couldn't be ignored. Who knew what would happen when the Tower was

switched on? Perhaps there was something after all. It made sense for the great prophet to return now, the culmination of worship for two millennia. He wondered what would be in it for him.

He pressed the intercom button set into the black mahogany desk. Outside, lightning flickered.

'Scribe,' he ordered, 'send orders to the *Sagrada*: the girl Tegan Jovanka must be brought to me personally on Archetrix. To be done immediately. Father Confessor Similus to take full responsibility for her safe delivery.' He needed no threat. The crew of the *Sagrada* knew what would happen to them if they fouled up. 'Oh,' he added as an afterthought, 'and ask my personal guard to expedite the Father Confessor's journey into the afterlife as soon as the girl arrives.'

He leaned back in his chair. Now all he had to do was wait. He had six months. Six months before the Zeta Project did what two thousand years of history had failed to do. Not bad, considering that a year and a half ago he had been chained to a stone floor.

No good, he was already bored. After five years in prison he wanted to exercise, push himself a little. He reached for the intercom. 'Arrange my personal shuttle. Destination Alpha Major.'

He heard a voice calling his name. Someone was shaking him. The Doctor snapped his eyes open to see Nyssa standing over him, her eyes still shadowed with the memory of events on the Energy Tower.

'Asleep?' he said blearily. 'I must be worse affected than I thought.' Could he still feel the presence? Yes, on the edge of consciousness, like the ringing pain of a headache. Like hundreds of voices gnawing at his mind. He felt himself drawn towards the presence, found his mind moving closer to its vastness; found its overwhelming blackness somehow comforting... to lose oneself in a great black blanket... the abyss...

'Doctor!' came a voice from somewhere. Nyssa. He forced his eyes to focus, saw the cabin of the stealth ship again, the light after that infinite dark over-bright, painful.

'It's destroying me,' he said, his chest heaving, his head aching, his muscles tense and sore.

'The Captain wants you to come to the bridge.' Nyssa seemed nervous. 'Something's happening.'

The Doctor felt spent, used up. He wanted to prepare himself for what would no doubt be a long battle against the presence in his mind. However, he knew he had to keep going in the real world, to find the physical reason for his mental agonies.

He hauled himself off the small bunk. 'Come on,' he said, trying to fool Nyssa that he was full of life.

The bridge was compact, like a submarine. Workstations filled the room to bursting with consoles, screens, chairs and crew. The Doctor and Nyssa were forced to hunch over as the Captain led them to the comm station.

'We picked it up on scan about an hour ago,' said the Captain. To the Doctor he seemed little more than a boy.

'All right,' he replied, 'let's take a look.'

The comm operator indicated an infrared scanner. 'There, moving quickly.'

The Doctor couldn't have failed to see it. A huge infrared wave travelling upwards from the bottom of the scanner. 'How wide is your scan?'

The comm op laughed. 'This is as large as we go. You could get the whole system in this.'

The Doctor was confused. 'What? But that would mean...'

'Exactly,' said the Captain. 'This energy wave is bigger than a solar system. And heading our way at close to the speed of light.'

The Doctor felt icy needles hammering into him. 'From the Energy Tower?'

'Hard to say. The Energy Tower has been destroyed.'

The Doctor rubbed his chin. He was trying to prevent the fear in his stomach rush up into his brain. 'Can we outrun it?'

'For a while, but it's increasing speed. Soon it'll be across the light barrier and then it's anyone's guess.'

They were all looking at him, waiting for him to provide the solution. Like they always did. But what sort of solution was there to this?

'Doctor?' asked Nyssa. 'What can we do?'

He tried to think of something, anything, but his mind was locked, not responding. He was helpless, they all were.

'The energy wave has broken through the light barrier, Captain,' barked the comm op.

'Very good, comm op. Helm, increase speed to maximum.'

'Aye, sir!' shouted the helm operator.

'Doctor!' Nyssa insisted. 'Come on!'

'Energy wave has increased speed. It will reach us in twenty-seven seconds.'

The Captain smashed his fists on to the console. 'More power!' he yelled.

The Doctor was transfixed by the infrared screen. The wave had leapt upwards and overwhelmed over three-quarters of the scanner. It was now in hyper-space and still gaining speed. Nothing could stop it.

'Ten seconds.'

'Engines running at eighteen per cent overload, Captain. Power will be exhausted in eight minutes.'

'Keep going!'

The wave was almost at the top of the screen. The bridge seemed to be changing colour. The lights were dimming; shadows lengthened.

'Five seconds.'

They all heard it. That impossible roar. The roar of something so powerful it defied physics and pushed sound ahead of itself. The loudest thunderstorm in the universe. The crew slapped their hands over their ears.

The scanner was now totally red.

The Doctor hit his head on the bunk above him. He realised he was shouting. He fell back, his clothing soaked with perspiration, his breathing rapid and unpleasant. The voices in his mind fell back to a tinny murmur. But they didn't go away.

'Doctor, what's happening to you?' asked Nyssa, frightened. She pressed a cold compress to his forehead. Like in the dream, her eyes retained a weary heaviness. Someone who had seen too much.

The Doctor gritted his teeth. He wasn't going to give in. He forced himself to forget the vision, not to give it the time of day. He knew this wouldn't help in the long run, that he was allowing the presence to fester, to grow until it would come back, stronger and nastier every time. His only chance was to find out why and stop it happening. Until then, he could allow himself no rest. He tried to stand as the voices grew loud, filling his head. 'Nyssa,' he croaked, sparing as much of

himself as he could to speak to her. 'Find out what you can... about... about... the anti-matter... my only chance...'

Then the darkness took over again.

Captain Vishin led Nyssa to a small corner of the bridge. The stealth ship was compact, designed for silent running, with little room for luxury. Nyssa guessed that there were about eight crew members, and that they knew little about the team they were supposed to pick up. She found the men – always men in this culture, she noticed – pleasant but uncommunicative, unwilling to provide anything but practical information.

She had wondered when Captain Vishin would want to ask her some questions. He had a bright, young face, topped with light brown hair. A thin moustache, perhaps an attempt to make himself look older, stretched neatly over his top lip.

'So,' he said as they huddled round a small extended desk. 'Who are you?' His voice was friendly, his smile seemingly genuine. She decided to tell him the truth.

When she had finished, the Captain's smile was more forced. 'Do you realise what you're telling me?' he said, his voice working hard to keep itself even.

'The simple answer is no. I was rather hoping you could tell *me*.'

Captain Vishin looked at her, stroking his moustache with the end of a pencil. Something was amusing him.

'What's so funny?' asked Nyssa, who had never liked being the subject of anyone's joke.

'Nothing,' he replied, still trying to conceal a smile 'I've never seen a woman act the way you act before.'

'Don't you have women here?'

'Of course, but they don't traipse around the holy Energy Tower fighting monsters. They stay at home and raise children.'

Nyssa could imagine Tegan's response to such a comment. Luckily, she had been brought up to be polite. 'Are you going to help me? Even if I am only a woman.'

He considered for a moment. 'All right,' he said at last. 'What do you want to know?'

Extract from: *The Rise of the Morestran Orthodox Empire*
official Church history.

The original Cult of Science is believed to have been formed over five hundred years ago by disaffected nobles from a variety of Morestran Imperial Houses.

The Cult began as a reaction by certain nobles to the passing of the Science Law¹ throughout the Morestran Empire, which led to the decline of the Imperial Families, culminating in the Second Great Technology War of 1609.

The movement existed to preserve and continue a secular technological development, separate to the Sorenson Academy, in particular placing great interest in the restoration of technological artefacts from the Old Empire. It was just after the war that the infamous compass and sun symbol representing the Cult came into being.

Inevitably, as the value of the artefacts increased, the original Cult splintered and, it is believed, became three differing factions, all bearing the same name, all in conflict with one another.²

In the present day, the Church has recorded at least six hundred organised groups currently using the title and symbols of the Cult of Science. The most notable is based on Alpha Major itself, where a recently interred member estimated a membership of over one thousand, covertly funded by at least two Imperial Houses, one being the House of Morestra itself.

This group is militant, well financed and highly structured, operating in small cells, tightly regimented. It possesses a number of spacecraft and has access to secretly stored imperial technology.

This group has been actively infiltrated by a large number of Church agents for a number of years, an operation initiated successfully by the noted Zero Man, Kristyan Fall, before his removal.

The Cult remains the only real possibility for scientific development outside the specific remit of the Sorenson Academy in the Morestran Empire and is therefore something of a necessary evil, used by both the Church and the Imperial Houses to develop non-Tower related equipment. This Cult's most notable success was the covert Church-funded mission to rediscover Zeta Minor in 1993.³

Despite their continued compromise by infiltration, the Cult of Science, at least this particular group of it, presents a very real threat to the Church, as it remains the only active access to technology for the emasculated Imperial Houses. Indeed,

two suspected leaders of the Cult of Science are the Princes Hippolito and Antonio, sons of the Emperor himself. It is therefore judged accordingly and appropriate punitive action taken when necessary.

1. This law was passed by the Church in c. 1530 at the behest of the statisticians at Sorenson Academy led by Fr Potollias. These statisticians had calculated that without such a sanction the Morestran Empire would exhaust its mineral and technological wealth within two centuries, preventing completion of the Great Energy Tower.

2. For a fuller account of the Great Technology War, Fr Lewington's The Church Triumphant remains the most accurate.

3. The mission was led by Kavelli, the Church Service agent responsible for Kristyan Fall's termination.

The Doctor and Nyssa left the system in their stealth ship, heading for Alpha Major. Tegan too, in the *Sagrada*, travelled to her rendezvous with Kristyan Fall, never seeing the Energy Tower in its full glowing glory.

Torre del Oro, the Tower of Gold. Growing from its host planet like some gigantic white parasite. At its base, the cylinder bifurcated into two flat, spatula-shaped 'feet': magnetic storage units curving round the planet's surface, ready to translate the planet's spin into energy.

Generations of caretakers bounced in low-gravity spacesuits over the dead dust of the planet's surface. For decades they had roamed the eight-hundred-mile diameter of these 'feet' that hovered over their heads. Checking. Checking and rechecking. This was the oldest part of the Tower, and their job was to ensure that nothing would malfunction come the time. Lifetimes lived beneath these two dark plates, in shadow, not knowing any other way to be, all thought centred on the great trunk that disappeared into the heavens.

Up and out of the atmosphere, the cylinder became spindly, not needing to conform to any laws of gravity. A hundred miles up and more, impossibly long, the spire that bankrupted an empire, and up even more, past the silent dimensional rift emanators until reaching the delivery point: spheres as big as cities, designed to channel enough power to last an eternity.

And inside, lost in the veins and arteries of this slumbering newborn: Morestran men, only a few now, sealing up corridors and dynamiting ceilings, to halt the infection growing inside.

The Great Morestran Energy Tower, two thousand years in the making, almost complete. Almost ready to wake up.

The Court

Chapter Five

Imperial Department of Numbers census report. 1999 NCC. Order transmitted to the noble lords Hippolito and Antonio.

According to statistics, the Morestran Empire currently spans a diameter of eighty million light years, containing one thousand four hundred and twenty-seven inhabited solar systems.

THE OUTER SYSTEMS

Of these systems, eight hundred and ninety-two are presently beyond the technological reach of the empire.

Their resources have been ninety per cent drained in the service of the Energy Tower and predictions indicate that none retains the capability of space travel. Until the Energy Tower is activated, these systems may be considered effectively independent from Morestran rule.

Projections indicate that ninety per cent of those inhabitants will claim fealty to the Church should the New Technological Age reach them, due to the planned oral tradition growth rate of Leyenda Negra as detailed in the First Bargain.

THE INNER SYSTEMS

The remaining systems continue a limited contact with the empire and can be segregated into loyalty percentages thus: seventy-one per cent of systems can be considered Church controlled systems, twenty-five per cent Imperial systems and the remaining four per cent currently undergoing civil wars with no overall control.

Strategic advantage, however remains with the Imperium, who control the Central Morestran Systems, including the homeworld Morestra/Alpha Major. These Central Systems retain limited technological resources under the terms of the First Amendment.

Here is a brief summary of our current thinking concerning the activation of the Energy Tower.

If the Church maintains its commitment to the First Bargain of the Ancients, that of relinquishing some or all of its political power when the Energy Tower becomes a reality, we predict a swing of at least sixty per cent of Inner System governments siding with the Imperium within five years. This is due to a number of factors, including the reaction to centuries of repressive moral law, restrictive education and welfare policies, sanctioning of technology, disillusionment with government and the compulsory conscription of males into Church orders. Despite its numerical and political superiority, the Church lacks sufficient material resources to achieve an overthrow of the Imperium at this present time.

If as seems more likely, the Church refuses to relinquish political power once the Energy Tower is complete, the Imperium will be forced into a conflict situation. Given the theoretical resources of the Tower, which due to the Second Bargain of the Ancients, that all power be shared equally amongst all people of the Morestran Empire (interpreted in the Second Amendment as power to be shared between the Imperium and the Church), we are unable to predict the outcome of the extreme and limitless war that is sure to follow.

The third outcome is, of course, that the Energy Tower will be switched on at the allotted time and fail to work. You will be more than aware of the implications of that particular possibility.

I trust the figures included with this conclusion are of benefit to you, My Lords. I, and my department, remain your true and loyal servants to the end of time.

They were on the stealth ship for a week. All the time the Doctor got worse. He was rarely awake and his sleep was punctuated by bad dreams. As Nyssa watched over him, he sweated and shouted at unseen enemies. She had never before seen him in such a state. The worst of it was that there was nothing she could do. In his occasional lucid moments he would only state that he had to concentrate all his mental resources on battling whatever force had entered his mind. He was searching, so he said, for a way to communicate, a way to contact the presence without

destroying his sanity. Then he would return to his coma, each time more despondent, more weary.

The crew on the stealth ship could do nothing. Captain Vishin was worried but, as he told Nyssa, he was more concerned about remaining screened as they entered patrolled space. They were heading for the Alpha System, the home of the Morestran Empire.

'We will rendezvous with the scheduled shuttle flight between Alpha Major and Minor. It's a busy service, one we hope the Church won't be expecting us to use.'

'Why?' asked Nyssa.

Vishin laughed. 'This is a stealth ship,' he explained in a mock patronising voice. 'Owned by the Imperial House. Very secret. Very new. If we land on the imperial capital, then the Church are bound to start asking questions about how such a blasphemy managed to get itself built.'

'I don't understand,' said Nyssa. 'Why are the Church so wound up about technology anyway?'

'Work of the Dark Gods. Not allowed. Any technological advancement has to be vetted by the Church, who decide whether it can be used for the Tower. If it is, great, send the inventor to the Academy and get them working. If not, sorry. Most people won't go near any machine now. Bad luck. Eternal damnation.'

'Sounds a very effective method of technological containment.'

'You know, you're very intelligent for a girl.'

Nyssa thought that comment unworthy of a reply.

When they had space-docked with the shuttle, Nyssa and a semi-conscious Doctor were sneaked on board and ushered to the Nobles' lounge. The flight attendant provided the cover story: they had been allocated the wrong seats in Scribe Class.

Vishin had thought that there might be trouble with her gender so he rustled up a cloak and a badge and told her to act as the Doctor's nurse. Uncommon but not forbidden. Still, as she helped the Doctor up the narrow aisle to their seats, the other passengers, a rather haughty lot, gave her some very unpleasant looks.

Nyssa ignored them as she helped the Doctor to sit down. She felt uncomfortably aware that she was the centre of attention. Why were they angry with her?

She glanced across the central aisle to the opposite row of seats. She was surprised to see another woman, asleep on her own. No wonder the passengers seemed outraged. Two women on one flight! Unheard of! She suppressed a giggle.

The woman was dressed in fine colourful silks, her hair contained by an embroidered bonnet.

It was Tegan.

Nyssa opened her mouth to speak when she caught the disapproving looks of the old men sat around her. They took no pains to disguise their displeasure. She wasn't surprised. They may have been thousands of years in the future but the Morestran treatment of women was prehistoric.

She found the bravery to hiss, 'Tegan!' but her companion didn't even stir. She was pale, wrapped in her thin dress that reminded Nyssa of the baroque fashions of Traken. Perhaps, like the Doctor, she was ill.

She turned to the Doctor, still struggling with his own bad dreams. Marvellous.

Nyssa slumped back in her seat, aware of the scrutiny of her every movement by the bad-tempered nobles.

This was going to be a long flight.

The shuttle was due in at midday, capital time. He knew that the stealth ship was to have met with a scheduled Minor to Major flight under cover of a refuelling stop, the infiltration team transferring aboard. An eventual landing at San Salamar Spaceport.

Ferdinand didn't know any more but suspected that the heavy presence of Imperial Guard would lead him to the right terminal.

It had taken time to find and cross-check timetables so they were rushing. Harwood, dressed in the Vindice livery, was close on Ferdinand's tail. Ferdinand had decided high profile was their best chance of success. He himself was wearing his full Investigator's uniform. However, just in case, Harwood's hessian robes concealed the ever-present shotgun. Not enough to win a shooting match but capable of clearing space.

The spaceport was full, mainly courier scribes waiting to greet their political masters. The distinctive smells of sweat, disinfectant and incense vied for airspace. Ferdinand was dashing through the austere, gigantic arrivals lounge. If he lost this, his case was finished – probably along with his life.

Angelo would be gunning for him and unless he had something to bargain with he was dead. They had released the Duke late that morning, in a deserted old town far from the capital. He wouldn't be telling anyone about Ferdinand until it was too late, especially with a broken jaw. Still, this had to be a success.

The roar of a descending spaceship rang round the lounge. Ferdinand spotted a group of guards move out to the terminal gates. He recognised their leader, Stathen or Staten or something, a commoner used by the brothers for heavy security work. Had to be here for the infiltration group. They were carrying weapons. This wasn't going to be easy.

Ferdinand moved forward. Without any attempt at secrecy he barged his way through the crowd. He knocked down a young monk, who cursed him. The Imperial Guard were moving through the gate. Outside, through smeared spaceport windows, Ferdinand saw the shuttle taxiing into position. Ground crews were standing ready to open it up.

He held back, ignoring the complaining monks on his back. He whipped out his Special Investigations badge of office. The complaining stopped.

He would have to time this carefully. Harwood was to his left, taking up a position to cover the arrivals gate.

At last, the shuttle airlocks opened with a hiss of vapour. Portable steps were rolled into position. Ferdinand took deep breaths to calm himself. He was about to commit possibly the most stupid act of his life.

Passengers emerged, brightly coloured in the livery of the various imperial families that employed them. Ferdinand thought he was going to have to rely on the guards to point him to the infiltration team but when they stepped out into Morestran air, he knew it had to be them.

Two of the infiltration team were female.

The third was clearly a sick man, dressed in a strangely styled coat. A floppy white hat was pushed down on to his head. He staggered down the steps, guided by one of the girls. The other wore the silken gown of an imperial noblewoman, one of the lesser houses. Like the man, she seemed dazed.

Immediately, the guards were moving in. Ferdinand nodded to Harwood and dashed forward.

Stathen (or whatever his name was) was just reaching the infiltration team when Ferdinand came tearing out of the arrivals gate.

The guards reached for their guns and were pointing them at him before he got even close.

Ferdinand froze. People around them were screaming and running, leaving him exposed.

‘Stay back!’ yelled the captain.

Guards grabbed the girls and the man.

Ferdinand held his badge high. ‘Special Investigator!’

‘Vindice? What are you doing here?’ said Stathen.

‘These people are mine.’

Stathen unholstered his pistol and waved it at his prisoners. ‘My orders are to deliver them to the imperial court.’

‘Your orders have changed. I have seniority. You are to hand them over to me immediately.’

Ferdinand began to walk forward very, very slowly. The prisoners seemed confused, unaware of what was happening. ‘You are deliberately compromising a Special Investigations operation. Hand over these people now.’

‘Where’s your authority?’

‘My badge. I outrank you. Obey my orders or pay the consequences.’

‘No.’ They were practically face to face now. Ferdinand could almost feel the gun barrels on his back.

‘You really want Special Investigations asking you why you preferred to disobey a direct order than do what you’re told? Who are you to say no to a member of a noble house?’

‘My orders come from the imperial palace.’

‘I’ll only tell you one more time. Give me these people or I will have you arrested.’

Stathen’s eyes blazed hatred at him. Ferdinand moved forward and tried to pull the sick man away. For a second Stathen refused to let him go. Then he dropped his arm, feigning indifference. ‘Go and check,’ he snarled at one of his men. The guard started to run back to the arrivals lounge.

‘With me,’ Ferdinand snapped at what he hoped were now his prisoners.

‘You’ll never get away with this,’ said Stathen.

Ferdinand slapped the captain with his badge. While Stathen cringed in disbelief, he turned to the guards. ‘Put

those weapons away. What are you trying to do? Attract even more attention?’

He glared into Stathen’s face. Judging by the barely suppressed anger, Ferdinand presumed that here was another man who wanted him dead. However, there was no stopping now. ‘Tell them!’ he bellowed.

Very, very reluctantly, Stathen nodded.

The guards holstered their guns. Their faces were mean, frustrated, not wanting him to get away with it.

Ferdinand watched Harwood emerge from the arrivals lounge. The big man jumped into a waiting coach and nodded. The driver cracked the whip and the horses began moving towards them.

‘If you’re not telling the truth...’ said Stathen, also seeing the coach.

Ferdinand ignored him, turning instead to the infiltration team. ‘Get going.’

The coach reached them. The prisoners shuffled obediently over to it, still silent, still unsure of what was happening to them.

Stathen made a move for his gun.

‘I wouldn’t,’ said Ferdinand and indicated Harwood, seated next to the driver, shotgun raised. Stathen licked his lips.

The prisoners climbed into the coach. Ferdinand followed. The whip cracked again and they shuddered away, Ferdinand’s eyes never leaving the seething guards. As they drove off the runway, the tiny figure of Stathen started running for the arrivals lounge.

Duke Angelo, lord of the Second House of Morestra, was in a foul mood. He had finally managed to get some serfs to provide him with transport back to his palace. Attempting to spit out words through dried blood and splinters of teeth had been a humiliating experience. Ferdinand du Vindice was going to die. Slowly. He gave orders to his personal guard.

Once the family surgeon had done his painful work, the Duke had retired to his bedchamber. He wasn’t going to be disturbed for anything by anybody. Luckily, the Duchess was in one of her meditation periods and was locked up in the family cloisters for the next three Morestran months, until the Duke was ready to begin breeding again.

He was angry enough to kill somebody, so he had ordered two junior scribes to be tied up in the courtyard outside his

bedchamber window. He spent a rejuvenating hour with his hunting rifle taking potshots, imagining Ferdinand's face folding under a bullet, until weariness took over and he went to bed. He heard the servants removing the bodies outside. He turned over and the wiring in his jaw sent fresh pain into his face.

He awoke from disturbing dreams to feel a cold cylinder pressing against his forehead. For a moment he was confused, then he realised.

He began to cry, making his jaw ache again.

'Sshh,' said Kristyan Fall.

She didn't remember anything except stepping off the shuttle into a forest of guns.

They had been travelling for two hours. Now they had stopped. The carriage in which they had been herded was nothing more than a large, rattling box.

Inevitably, Nyssa asked Tegan the questions she hoped she wouldn't.

'Tegan, what happened to you?'

Tegan took a deep breath. It all seemed a dream. She remembered the *Sagrada* and the oily man, but everything else was unclear, a blur. 'I'm not sure. They must have drugged me. I remember being asked a load of questions about the Doctor and being forced into a sort of tube thing. Then I was cold, very cold. The next thing I remember is waking up and seeing you and the Doctor on that shuttle. I wanted to help him but... he told me he had enemies... many enemies... had to help him.'

'Who told you this?'

'I don't know. It must have been the confessor, on the spaceship.'

'It sounds to me like you had an ally on that ship. He must have helped you escape.'

'I can't believe it was him. He was such a loathsome little toad.'

Tegan looked forlornly at the sleeping Doctor, splayed out in the rear seat. 'How long has he been like this?'

'Too long. I just can't break him out of it.'

'Nyssa, what's going on? What's all this Tower business?'

Nyssa sighed. 'Well, as far as I can make out, this empire has two factions: the imperial families and the Church. They came up with this idea to build a great Energy Tower to

provide them with limitless energy. Captain Vishin said they'd been building it for two thousand years, using up nearly all the material resources of the empire.'

Tegan sat back. 'No wonder it's so big. Must have taken some doing.'

There was the grind of a lock and the carriage door was opened. Their captor, the one with the glasses, looked at them sternly. 'It did,' he said.

'What did?' snapped Tegan.

'Take some doing. But of course you know that.'

'I wouldn't be too sure,' said Nyssa carefully.

The man sniffed. '*Leyenda Negra*.' He was looking at blank faces. 'The Black Legend. The Gateway to Hell. Where the Dark Gods wait, preparing to come across into our universe. Our only hope: to build the Tower and stop it all. Everything must serve the Tower.' He gave a sardonic laugh. 'It's a con. A trick to get the subjects to part with their resources. A load of nonsense.'

'It's not nonsense,' said the Doctor. Tegan turned to see him sitting up. He still seemed weary but the look of hopelessness that had permeated his body had gone.

'What do you mean?' Tegan asked.

The Doctor's face was set, determined.

'How do you know?' said Nyssa.

He looked at each of them in turn. 'Because the Dark Gods told me.'

He couldn't remember how long he'd been out there in the blackness. It had felt like an eternity.

He had forced his mind to travel unfamiliar pathways, to find his way in the dark, a way to tread safely. It had been like shining a torch on to a black wall, searching out invisible holes.

Many times he had gone too close, confronted it too directly, feeling his mind numb and begin to tip over into the abyss, swallowed up by the darkness.

A long time in, he had succeeded. He created a mental construct, an image that he could enter fairly safely, travelling inside the black tunnel, keeping the engulfing black void at bay.

A room in a palace. Black and white flagstones covered the floor like a chessboard. Stained-glass windows held back a pitch-black night sky. No, not a sky. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Slender candles glowed in ornate gold candelabra on an onyx table. He found himself sitting in a large grotesquely carved chair.

At the end of the room, a door. And on the other side of the door, behind its thick iron hinges, the telegraph operator.

He heard its grunts and squeals, heard shrieks and twists as it hauled itself through a series of guises, trying to discover one that the Doctor could bear to witness without it annihilating him.

He had been right. The blackness was not trying to destroy him, it was trying to help.

He sensed pressure: vast, barely comprehensible pressure. Pressure to keep this image together, emanating from those desperate to sustain this thin wedge of contact, of understanding. They too were under strain, using all their resources to keep this fragile link alive. Two opposing forces, straining to communicate.

At last, he sensed stability from the other side of the door. It began to swing open. He prepared himself for a shock but the creature that entered was anything but shocking.

It was dressed in red and black leather. A cloak hid its body, the folds of the coat fizzing and blurring. On its head a black helmet, metal plumes sprouting from its peak. Smoke trickled through the grilles in its face.

The door slammed shut as it entered the room. He concentrated on not thinking about the void outside. The figure sat at the table opposite.

They talked.

'Talked?' asked Tegan.

'Well...' The Doctor smiled ruefully. 'Not as such. More, we understood. By the way, it's nice to see you again, Tegan. Where have you been?'

Ferdinand didn't know what they were babbling about. He was beginning to wonder whether he'd got the right people. What sort of infiltration team was this supposed to be?

'What did you talk... understand... about?' asked Nyssa.

The coach was jumping its way over cobblestones again, sending them bouncing. The man they called the Doctor was suddenly very alert, his bright young eyes full of wonder and curiosity. Ferdinand watched them suspiciously from where he sat, next to Tegan.

'I remembered, from before. They helped me. What the Morestrans are doing, collecting anti-matter, is causing a great imbalance both here and on the other side, in their universe.'

'Anti-matter?' asked Tegan.

'Well, not anti-matter in the way you understand it. Or as the Time Lords understand it. It's more like a nothingness, a universe utterly opposite to our own. It has existed alongside our universe since time began. In fact, you might be better off thinking of it as "ante-matter".'

'What?' Ferdinand scoffed, disbelieving.

'Never mind. Somehow the Morestrans have found a way to transport it into this dimension. What's important is that if they continue to mine the stuff, bringing it from one universe to another, the two opposing natural forces will react against each other and...'

'And what?' Tegan was confused, frightened. The Doctor nodded to Nyssa. She was ashen-faced. Even Ferdinand found himself being caught up in this messianic lunacy.

'Obliteration. Both forces cancelling each other out. The end of everything.'

The Doctor nodded.

'As far as I could understand, those beings that exist on the other side have been trying to find a way to stop the Morestrans and contacting me was the only method they could employ. Can you imagine how much effort it has cost them to breach our universe and transmit their message into my mind? Inconceivable. No wonder it nearly drove me mad. I must not fail them.'

'So you've got the message now, right? They've switched off their SOS?'

The Doctor smiled, sad for some reason. 'It's not as simple as that, Tegan. Don't you understand? Their universe, it's so different, so alien, that even Time has a completely different meaning. They cannot stop what they do just like that. They must continue trying to stabilise the breach that these Morestrans are creating. Which means that although I can switch it all off a lot more easily, it's still there, inside me, growing. Unless I can return the anti-matter, unless the balance is restored, their cry for help is going to kill me.'

EXTRACT: OFFICIAL COURT TRANSCRIPT – 16.01.99
NCC.

I, Scribe Thorenson, declare that this document contains a full and frank testimonial of the day's business of the IMPERIAL COURT OF MORESTRA.

Extract commences: 09:50 Capital Time.

Presiding, the most noble lords of the House of Morestra, sons of the Emperor, Hippolito and Antonio, regents to Empire.

CHAMBERLAIN: The Morestran Court prefers the petition of His Eminence, the royal confessor, Arch-Cardinal Constantine, true servant of the Morestran Orthodox Church.

HIS EMINENCE: Will the court recognise the humble petition of its loyal servant?

LORD HIPPOLITO: It will.

HIS EMINENCE: May I offer my sincere regrets on the most tragic death of the Duke of the Second House of Morestra, the Duke Angelo.

LORD ANTONIO: Your condolences are most comforting.

HIS EMINENCE: I trust all efforts are being made to uncover the truth of this savage incident.

LORD HIPPOLITO: It is so. However, such a 'savage incident' appears to have arrived at a most convenient moment for some.

HIS EMINENCE: I am at a loss as to the meaning of your statement.

LORD ANTONIO: My brother merely wishes to point out to you that in this year of the great fulmination, the assassination of one of the highest nobles in the empire could be considered a very provocative action.

HIS EMINENCE: If my noble lord would like to clarify his statement. Very carefully.

LORD HIPPOLITO: Come, come, Your Eminence. The Church is playing its hand a little early.

HIS EMINENCE: How regrettable that His Most Noble Lordship has not acquainted himself with such an inconvenience in this mystery as the facts. Surely, he is aware of the voices being raised that it was a member of the imperial line, a low noble, who was responsible, nay, sanctioned, to oversee the death of the Duke.

LORD ANTONIO: Sanctioned? By whom?

HIS EMINENCE: By those who stand to gain from anarchy. The imperial families, like the holy fathers, have kept to the ancient agreements and been considered untouchable. Such a transgression as this can only serve to end half a century of Pax Morestrana and plunge the empire into chaos, months before the fulfilment of its divine destiny. It would appear to me that those who ordered the assassination of the Duke did so precisely to disrupt this destiny.

LORD HIPPOLITO: Yet it was a noble who was murdered, not one of your clergy.

HIS EMINENCE: A plot, to discredit the Church.

LORD ANTONIO: Has His Eminence taken leave of his senses?

HIS EMINENCE: How dare you? This is monstrous!

LORD HIPPOLITO: Perhaps. But before you have a seizure, why not tell us what Kristyan Fall's role in all this might be.

HIS EMINENCE: I have no knowledge of such a personage.

LORD HIPPOLITO: Really? Strange, then, that he should be recognised arriving on Morestra three days ago on a specially scheduled transport vessel.

LORD ANTONIO: Let me refresh your memory. Kristyan Fall. The Zero Man. Head of the Church Service. Believed killed by the Church itself five years ago.

HIS EMINENCE: These accusations are monstrous lies! My Lords, you insult not only my worthless self but the whole Church with such allegations.

LORD HIPPOLITO: We only wish, like yourself, to discover the truth. Now, if the Zero Man were to be on this planet, it might be in all our interests to locate him.

HIS EMINENCE: My Lords, I am shocked and saddened that I have been treated in such a disrespectful manner. I must urge you to reconsider your actions, whatever they may be. In the meantime, I request leave of you to consult with the High Council.

LORD ANTONIO: You have leave. And consult carefully.

HIS EMINENCE: I remain your humble servant.

LORD HIPPOLITO: Of course you do.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS.

Arch-Cardinal Constantine was absolutely fuming when he returned to his private chambers in the imperial palace. He hurled his mitre and crown at his servants and stormed into

his conference room. His Council, high cardinals and pontiffs responsible for affairs on Alpha Major, flocked in sheepishly after him, worried what the meeting with the brothers might mean.

The Arch-Cardinal flung himself into his elaborate throne. He gestured impatiently with gold-ringed hands for wine. A golden goblet arrived immediately, was drained and a second ordered before the Council had a chance to take their places.

'Those arrogant puppies!' he bellowed. 'When the Tower is complete I will crush them, sweep them aside like dust! They will be brothers in death!'

The Council waited patiently. They were used to these tantrums.

'How did they find out about Fall? This whole operation is a complete shambles! Who is the traitor? One of you. I know it!'

Eyes turned away from his scorching stare. The members of the Council knew too well how random the Arch-Cardinal's acts of revenge could be. He was capable of anything in one these rages.

'Somebody speak to me!' he screamed.

A nervous deacon, new to the court, began to speak. 'Your Eminence, perhaps...'

That was all he managed before the Arch-Cardinal's plump finger was arrowed in on him. 'You! Guards! Execute him immediately!'

The deacon went green. Guards hauled him from the room. The Arch-Cardinal began to calm down. 'All right,' he sniffed. 'Who did kill that vain idiot the Duke?'

Mantrus, a wizened, wily old Cardinal long used to the intrigues of court, ventured, 'Perhaps your speculation was correct, Your Eminence. We know of his kidnapping by the Special Investigation officers. Perhaps they did it to discredit us.' He sat back, smug. In his sumptuous robes he looked like a skeletal peacock.

'No, no,' replied the Arch-Cardinal. 'Vindice's methods are well documented. He is a thorn in our flesh but would never be a reliable assassin. He is too much in love with his brothers to betray them and they are as surprised as us by the Duke's death. This assassination could lead to open war in the empire. A war which no one could win. Not yet anyway. No. There is only one man who could have penetrated

Angelo's palace without detection. Only one man with that kind of presumption.'

'So it was Kristyan Fall?'

'Hush. That name must never be mentioned in these chambers again.' He added as an afterthought, 'On penalty of death.'

The conference room was utterly silent.

The Arch-Cardinal nodded, thinking to himself, tapping his rings on the table. 'Kristyan Fall. Kristyan Fall. Of course.'

He slapped the table, coming to a decision. 'Gentlemen, I think it is time we found out just what he is doing with our Zeta Project.' He beamed proudly at his Council. 'You're my advisers. Advise me. What is your opinion?'

The chorus of agreement was enthusiastic, loud and unanimous.

Chapter Six

Ferdinand du Vindice couldn't believe who he'd snatched. After three hours interrogating this man who claimed to be the Doctor, he was beginning to think he was losing his mind. He tried to keep his voice even, modulated. 'So tell me about the original expedition.'

The Doctor sagged in front of him. He looked bored. He stretched out in his chair. The lamp on the table caught his frustration, casting deep shadows under his eyes. 'It was a long time ago. Look, we don't have time for this. You've got to help me get the anti-matter off that Tower.'

'Why?'

'I've told you. If you don't return it immediately then everything you know will be over.'

'Why would anti-matter be on the Energy Tower?'

'I presumed you would know. You built it.'

Ferdinand shook his head. 'Not me. The Church.'

'Does it matter?'

'It does to me.'

The Doctor rubbed his face. 'Look. You sent that infiltration team to the Tower for a reason. To find out what was happening there. I've told you. What are you going to do about it?'

Ferdinand stood up. He eased the cramp from his legs. 'You know, Doctor, I think it might be in my interest to believe you.'

'I never lie.'

'It just happens that your story confirms many of my own suspicions. The Church has been up to something with the Tower for years now. Small things at first: ships rerouted, equipment reassigned, that sort of thing. Then people started going missing, important people. This anti-matter story of yours, this could be the answer.'

'Exactly when did this all start?'

Ferdinand couldn't help but find himself believing the Doctor. After all, he didn't have much else. After the death of Duke Angelo, both the Church and his own side would now be after him. Kristyan Fall had done his job well; thrown him

to the lions. The Doctor was all he had to bargain with. He had to find out as much as he could.

‘When did it start? I don’t know. Five, six years ago perhaps. When I was first assigned to Special Investigations. There was a death at the Sorenson Academy.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor, as if Ferdinand had confirmed something. ‘Tell me about this Academy.’

‘Set up by the Professor himself to solve the secrets of the Tower. The Church combs the empire, finding the brightest minds and conscripting them. It’s the only development for technology that exists. Officially anyway.’

‘I see. Very interesting. What happened?’

‘Suicide. Student hanged himself in his cell. Thing is, all the witnesses disappeared. I suppose that was when I first felt something was going on.’

‘Suicide?’

‘A student named Robeson. Very bright. Worked on the Dimensional Mechanical theories or something. Hanged himself in the cell, for no readily apparent reason.’

‘Does there have to be a reason?’ The Doctor was pushing him, helping him help himself. He clearly knew a thing or two about interrogation techniques.

‘If you’re a monk, as all students at the Academy have to be, then you don’t just hang yourself. Not unless you want to end up in hell for eternity.’

The Doctor rubbed his chin. ‘Hmm. Well, that’s a beginning. It seems likely that whatever ends up at the Tower probably originated at the Academy. Perhaps Robeson found something out he shouldn’t have. Did you say Dimensional Mechanics?’

‘Mm.’

‘What’s that got to do with the Energy Tower?’

‘I’m not a scientist. I don’t really know. I think there’s supposed to be some sort of hole in space opened up which will connect the Tower from its anchor planet to the collection point.’

The Doctor seemed puzzled. ‘It all seems very convoluted. What sort of energy is this Tower supposed to produce anyway? How does it work?’

Ferdinand tried to remember. ‘In the words of the legend, “You must harness the movement of planets.”.’

A look of incredulity transformed the Doctor’s face. ‘The movement of planets? Arrant nonsense. Who said that?’

Ferdinand coughed. 'You did, actually.'

Kristyan Fall finished his run, all five miles of it, and was still chuckling when he returned to his apartment on the outskirts of Capital City. He bathed and dressed himself in an expensive grey suit. Even then, he was feeling remarkably pleased with himself.

Since the discovery of Duke Angelo's body a deep sense of unease had spread across Alpha Major. Fall had heard more than one rumour of war.

There was nothing he liked more than spreading a little chaos and uncertainty. And with the recently learned news, this was apparently going to continue.

The Morestran morning sun cast its light through his large bay window, setting the bare floorboards shining. Outside, three floors down, a horse-drawn cart was coming to a halt. Fall checked his cache of weapons – small arms and blades to see him through this little trip to Alpha – and wondered what he was going to do about the Doctor.

Fall had no doubt that this new arrival was the real Doctor, *il Dottore*. His source had been too accurate, too knowing.

He didn't consider himself a religious man, but the thought that the Prophet had returned was enough to give even him a thrill of appropriate awe and dread. It was a sensation he hadn't experienced in a long time.

Kristyan Fall realised he was enjoying his new life.

Something clicked at the rear of the house. Fall ignored the sound, continuing to fill his rucksack. It was incredible how quickly his mind had forgotten the five years of exile; how quickly he had got his old fitness and instincts back. He didn't regret the time, none of it was wasted. He just regretted not being able to repay Kavelli for his betrayal.

The door behind him burst open. Fall turned and fired a single silenced shot into the armoured Cardinal Guard raising his sword. The man fell with a metallic crash.

Running footsteps on the stairs. Cursing.

Fall swung his rucksack on to his shoulders and darted to the window. He punched with gloved fists and glass shattered, dropping into the street.

'Fall!' came a shout. A Church official entered the room. One of Constantine's lackeys. 'The Arch-Cardinal wants you.'

Fall shot him down in the doorway. The silencer sounded a gentle 'phut-phut' in the midst of all the clanging and

bashing. A second man was on him, this one a guard, sword drawn. Fall dodged his wild swing, kicked his legs away, caught him as he fell and snapped his neck on the drop.

Other bodies were trying to force the blocked door open. Unhurriedly, Fall unravelled the yellow cord in the rucksack. He connected it to the tiny grappling gun and fired it up on to the roof of the building opposite. The cord arched across the street like a striking snake.

A weapon was cocked. Fall snapped round and casually fired another shot into the doorway. A gun went off and he heard a scream of pain. He stepped lithely into the window frame and pulled on the cord. His mind made instant calculations.

The surviving soldiers finally bundled into his apartment. He hissed, 'Amateurs!' at them and jumped.

As the rope caught he angled himself for the landing. There were plenty of burnt-out windows in the building opposite and he had time to select what looked like the most comfortable. He landed with a jolt in a pile of dust.

He rolled and was up. Bullets were singing in through the hole in the wall. Men were shouting at him. Fall smiled and calmly reopened his rucksack. He found the small clock and pulled the little aerial up with his teeth. He pressed the alarm button.

His old apartment disappeared in orange flame. The strength of the blast caught even him by surprise, shock waves sending him to the floor.

Yes, he decided as he dusted off his suit, he was enjoying himself. Everything was working out. Only one more thing was left to do, something... historical. He had to meet the Doctor, the angel from the past. Had to meet him. And kill him.

Tegan was troubled. Although the night had gone quietly, she hadn't felt much like sleeping. Once the Doctor had been taken away by the tough little man with the glasses she had started to fret, to become anxious about his safety. A couple of times, the urge to do something had almost got the better of her and she had leapt up from her bunk, convinced he was in danger.

All she'd succeeded in doing with these actions was wake Nyssa, who had then questioned her for half an hour about what was wrong. Tegan liked Nyssa well enough, but

sometimes the caring, compassionate bit got on her nerves. It seemed false, a mask concealing some darker motive that might hurt the Doctor.

She told herself to calm down. Of course there was nothing wrong with Nyssa. How could she think such a thing?

Morning came and with it the Doctor. Their cell door swung open and in he burst, as fresh as a daisy. And only a day ago he had been on the brink of death. Tegan's admiration for him was limitless.

'Thank heaven,' said Nyssa, with relief. 'I was beginning to think we were going to spend the rest of our lives locked up in here.'

'Come on,' said the Doctor, all his old enthusiasm back. 'We've got work to do.'

They were in some old warehouse. While granite-faced Harwood stood discreet guard outside, Tegan and the others devoured a hastily prepared breakfast. The Doctor talked as he ate. Tegan noticed he was stuffing his face with the bread and cheese, making up for lost time.

She also noticed that Ferdinand never took his eyes off him, looking as if he still hadn't made his mind up about his new ally. Tegan was uneasy. Was Ferdinand a threat?

'There's a lot to do,' said the Doctor. 'Ferdinand and I are going to the Imperial Court. It could be dangerous, so you two are doing something else.'

'I want to come with you,' said Tegan instantly.

'No. You and Nyssa are to travel to the Sorenson Academy. In disguise. Now, this is a strictly masculine-oriented culture but Ferdinand here has told me that women are not entirely unknown at the Academy.'

'The Church doesn't want to waste any intellectual talent. Even a woman's limited mind might prove valuable to them.'

Tegan and Nyssa stopped eating. 'I beg your pardon?' asked Nyssa coldly.

Ferdinand looked at them. He seemed puzzled. 'What?'

'Never mind,' said the Doctor smoothly. 'Ferdinand will give you appropriate identification papers so you shouldn't have any trouble.'

'You'll be members of an imperial audit commission arriving to inspect their library system. That should give you access to all historical files.' Ferdinand's smile withered

under Tegan and Nyssa's blank stares. 'You'll be very high up,' he offered meekly.

'But Doctor...' Tegan began.

The Doctor raised his hand. 'No, Tegan. You must go to the Academy. We must find out whether this student Robeson discovered something.'

Tegan jumped from her chair, desperate to make her point.

'Tegan! Just for once, can we make a decision without a disagreement?'

Tegan went quiet, sitting down again. How could she get herself across to him?

'My man Harwood will come with you, in case you get into trouble,' said Ferdinand.

'How kind,' Nyssa replied with a voice that could have frozen water.

Tegan was still unhappy. 'Doctor, listen. I really think I should come with you.'

'Tegan.' He altered his tone, searching for something. 'Is there something wrong?'

'I think someone might be trying to kill you.'

There, she had said it.

The Doctor looked at her, confused. 'What do you mean?' he asked gently.

'I don't know, it's all a blur. After I left that spaceship: someone warning me, telling me that you were in danger.' She thumped the table. 'And since we came here, the feeling gets stronger and stronger and I can't remember! I can't!'

The Doctor clasped her hands. 'Don't try. Your memory will return when it's ready.'

'Doctor,' said Nyssa. 'Let Tegan come with you. I'll go to the Academy on my own.'

'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Please,' Tegan insisted.

The Doctor looked at her for a moment, perhaps trying to work out what she was thinking. Then he spoke. 'All right. Nyssa, are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

Then he was all energy again. 'Good. Let's get started.'

As soon as the scribe had taken his pill, Monsignor d'Undine read the dispatch from Kristyan Fall. The message was short

and in code. D'Undine rerolled the scroll and placed it on to a metal bowl on his desk. Then he burnt it.

He waited for Disposal to take the scribe away, then turned to his telescreens.

As head of Project Security, d'Undine had his own office. A luxury in this facility, with its confined rock and metal tunnels hacked out by Church engineers. Every inch of space had been fought for, drilled and wrested from the tough planetoid. Only the camouflaged landing pad on the surface could have provided any clue as to the existence of the station. Not that anyone would come out here anyway. Not in this distant system.

One of the benefits of having an office was that he could observe all aspects of the Zeta Project in absolute privacy. He spent hours watching the telescreens, flicking between security cameras. Monsignor d'Undine liked to watch. The cameras were everywhere, not a compartment in the facility left uncovered. Except one. His office. An office without windows.

He punched up camera two and watched Apothecary Boyd administering treatment in the main laboratory. A cruel smile passed d'Undine's lips. Boyd enjoyed treating patients. He didn't have to, his role was to supervise the facility, but as he had often remarked to d'Undine, he found the hands-on approach most satisfying. Screams rang round the lab.

Once Boyd had finished, d'Undine paged him on the intercom. He invited the head of the Zeta Project to join him in his office. Boyd removed his mask and gloves and nodded into the camera. In the background, patients were being wheelchaired back to their cells. Boyd's eyes were shining.

It took six minutes to walk from the main lab to his office. D'Undine had timed it many times. Boyd jogged, as he was prone to do. D'Undine played a little game and followed the whole journey on screen, flicking through cameras to catch every movement. He waited until he saw Boyd reach his door, then turned the telescreen off. He swivelled round in his leather chair.

Boyd entered. He was an athletic-looking sixty-year-old. Fifty-nine, d'Undine reminded himself, the Apothecary's dossier lying in a file in a secret drawer.

'D'Undine,' said Boyd, by way of greeting.

'Apothecary.'

'How was the processing?'

'Very effective.' Boyd was still flushed from his work. 'We're learning an awful lot from this project. Information that goes way beyond our original task. It will push medical science forward decades. Fascinating. I think the Council will be most pleased.'

'I'm sure. Drink?'

'Thank you.'

D'Undine motioned Boyd to sit, which he did, in the uncomfortable metal chair opposite the desk. The Apothecary didn't like him, he knew, but was careful not to upset him. With his connections, that would be most unwise.

D'Undine reached into his desk for the decanter. Alcohol was strictly forbidden here, but as he was in charge of policing this rule, he figured he could get away with it. This wouldn't be the first time Boyd had come in for a quiet briefing with his security chief.

'What's the word from Fall? Are the shipments arriving on time? We're working flat out but there's no doubt we can make that deadline.'

D'Undine poured the drink. He passed the glass to Boyd. 'Oh, there are no problems. In fact, I've just received orders to move on to the next stage of the Zeta Project.'

'Oh yes? What's that?' Boyd sipped his drink, clearly enjoying the taste.

D'Undine pulled the silenced pistol from the desk drawer and shot Apothecary Boyd through the heart.

He watched as the head of the Zeta Project stared at him in shock. For a few seconds neither man moved. Then the glass dropped from the Apothecary's hand and shattered on the floor. Boyd's mouth was moving up and down wordlessly until finally it rested in the open position. Blood began to seep through his surgeon's gown. He sank backwards into his chair.

'Church scum,' hissed Monsignor d'Undine and called up the disposal team.

² And so the proud fathers of faith were cast from their homes by the Unholy. Though their starships were old and engines perilous. Many amongst the chosen were afeared, crying,

³ 'Where can we go? Disaster awaits us!'

⁴ Until there appeared one amongst them who was not afraid. A man once a munitions technician. And his name was Hironshin. Hironshin spoke, saying,

⁵ 'Be not afraid! Our journey is not to disaster but to truth. This planet is old and dead, it will perish in sin. We have been chosen as those who will survive and begin again. God will provide. I have seen a land of seas and forests and mountains. Rejoice, Morestran faithful, rejoice!'

⁶ And it was with a glad heart that the chosen boarded their vessels and blasted off from the abandoned planet of Morestra. For forty months they travelled and although disaster afflicted many of the starships it came to pass that the chosen found the Beta System.

⁷ From the six ships of banishment two survived the perils of the void. Hironshin himself was taken in a fierce meteor storm and remains in our hearts as the First Prophet of the New Age, for they had indeed found the holy world.

⁸ And just as Hironshin had promised, the world was bountiful. Rich blue seas, great forests and high mountains. The chosen fell to their knees and blessed God for leading them to this new world.

⁹ And the chosen began to build and grow. High in the mountains, the great holy city was built and the elders named it Archetryx, which means Power in the ancient tongues.

¹⁰ Proud Archetryx! Blessed Home of the Chosen! Father to the Faithful! Let it stand for a thousand millennia!

Leyenda Negra, New Testament, Chapter 2, verses 2-10

Deep in the holy library of Archetryx stands a vault. This vault is guarded day and night by brothers specially chosen for their faith, purity and lack of imagination.

There are only two keys to this vault. One is held by His Papal Majesty Luciani XVII, alone in his tower of contemplation; the other is around the neck of the Deacon of Knowledge, Keeper of the Sacred Books.

None may know what secrets lie in the vault, none may enter. Rumours hint at unspeakable tomes, black spells, volumes of power. The knowledge of the Dark Gods that lie behind the Gate. Rumours of books bound in Morestran flesh and inked in Morestran blood.

And not just books. Ancient machines too. Machines from the Old Age, before the Energy Tower. Recordings containing terrible images, pictures of the Planet of Evil. Of the prophet Salamar, and his betrayer Vishinsky. Of the disciples Morelli, and Ponti and de Haan. And worst of all,

that which can never be witnessed by Morestran eyes for fear of madness and damnation and death, the ultimate vision: *il Dottore* himself.

So, imagine the panic, the dread, the holy terror, when, a week before Kristyan Fall arrived on Alpha Major to assassinate Duke Angelo, the library guards were discovered dead, the vault broken and open, and its forbidden contents ransacked.

Whoever Ferdinand du Vindice was, he got the job done. The man possessed an open mind and was energetic in his business. He had contacted his superiors and, despite opposition, had got what he wanted: a meeting with the rulers of the empire. Not bad for a day's work.

However, it was clear that Ferdinand hated the Church. Really hated the Church. He told the Doctor that he had dedicated his life to its downfall. The Doctor felt saddened by this, that someone so determined and able should find his only motivation through hate.

'Not hate, Doctor,' said Ferdinand as they travelled in the darkened coach to the imperial palace. 'Vengeance.'

'What's the difference?' asked Tegan.

The Doctor decided to stay out of the conversation. He wanted to know what Tegan was up to. Bringing her along was a risk but he'd rather have her close than endangering Nyssa. She had developed an almost obsessive desire to protect him. Where had that come from?

Ferdinand was talking but Tegan was having trouble concentrating. Why was she so agitated? What had she discovered? She kept shifting her gaze to look at him, as if reassuring herself he was all right.

'Evil men must pay for their evil deeds. There must be justice.'

The Doctor was taken by these statements. He turned to look at Ferdinand. He saw the hurt deep in him, the scars behind his eyes. What had happened to him? Who was he inside?

'I feel sorry for you,' said Tegan. 'I know how you feel, I've wanted to... to make someone pay for what he did. But it doesn't work. It doesn't help.'

Ferdinand stared into Tegan's eyes. 'I don't need pity. Just do what you've got to do. Convince the brothers to destroy that Tower.'

Lord Hippolito, co-regent to the Morestran Empire, looked across the antechamber to his brother. Antonio was trying not to appear surprised.

They liked their workplace to appear efficient. There was none of the florid decor of the court in here. These rooms were bare and functional, reflecting their stated intentions of getting things done for the empire. The Doctor and Ferdinand sat in austere office chairs watching Hippolito as he shuffled through a series of papers.

‘A fascinating story, Doctor,’ he said at last, an amused lilt to his voice. ‘How would you like us to address you? The Great Prophet? Saviour?’

‘I would like you to take me seriously.’

Antonio raised an eyebrow. It had been a while since they had been spoken to in such a manner.

Of the two, Antonio was the one with the looks. His long, flowing hair and square jaw made him the people’s favourite, whereas Hippolito went for the stern official, the man of vision, the one who worked away in the background. Both had the casual confidence of long-term authority. Together, they made an impressive team.

‘What do you think, brother?’

Antonio shrugged his broad shoulders. ‘What matters is what the court thinks.’

‘Well, Doctor,’ Hippolito said, fixing him with his famous stare. ‘You think you could stand up in court?’

‘I will do whatever it takes to get that Tower closed down.’

Ferdinand nodded. ‘What have we got to lose?’

Now, Hippolito had never much cared for Ferdinand du Vindice. Oh, he was a tremendous operative, thoroughly reliable, ruthless and fanatical. But despite his breeding he had a plebeian’s enthusiasm, a greed that went beyond the call of duty. He had no respect for the subtle strategies of the game against the Church. Given free rein, he would simply charge headlong into the fray. Of course, such soldiers were invaluable, but they had to know their place. It would have been distasteful to allow him into the open.

‘You are aware that the Church and many of the noble houses believe you murdered Duke Angelo.’

Ferdinand nodded, his face grim and set. ‘You know who it was.’

'You also take it upon yourself to kidnap our infiltration team without permission, in full view of an entire spaceport. And now you want me to bring this man into the court and claim he is the Great Prophet returned to us to warn the Morestran race not to complete something we've been building for two thousand years.'

'We'd be laughed out of the chamber. Before the Church deposed us,' said Antonio.

'I think it would be better to keep you here and wait for the right time. We must tread carefully, investigate further.' Hippolito finally arranged his papers and placed them neatly on the table. 'And that is that.'

Antonio gave him a wink. He then smiled at the two visitors, which meant that the interview was over.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'That is not that. There's been enough talk, enough playing games. Something on that great Energy Tower of yours isn't right. And the Church knows what it is. You can forget harnessing the movement of planets, because what you've got up there is anti-matter. And anti-matter in this universe is a bomb waiting to go off. The biggest bomb you can imagine. It's a miracle it hasn't gone off already...'

Hippolito realised he would have to get tough. 'Don't push your luck, Doctor.'

'Why aren't you listening to me? I'm not talking about some tiny explosion that just blows your ridiculous white elephant apart. I'm talking about the end. The end of everything.'

'Now I think you're exaggerating.'

'Am I? Well, if you don't act immediately we'll soon find out whether I'm exaggerating. The only problem is no one will be left to hear me say, "I told you so".'

'That's enough!' Antonio's booming tones came to his brother's rescue. 'We only have your word for that.'

'Why would the Church use anti-matter?' asked Hippolito, trying to keep his temper, trying to remain the diplomat. 'It's a forbidden substance, blasphemous. Crystals of the Dark Gods they call it. Anyway, where did they get it?'

'There's only one place,' the Doctor stated. 'Only one planet. The planet that sits balanced between this universe and the other one.'

'Zeta Minor?' Hippolito was astonished.

'The Planet of Evil?' Antonio echoed. 'You're joking.'

'No one knows where it is. Whether it even exists. It's just a legend.'

'Somebody, somewhere, has found Zeta Minor,' said the Doctor slowly. 'They have found a way to remove anti-matter from the planet, bring it here and put it in your Tower. Your infiltration team found this out and it destroyed them. This is not speculation, this is fact. And you're telling me I'm exaggerating.'

At last, Hippolito started to believe. Something cold travelled through his body. His scalp tightened. He struggled for words. 'It can't be true...'

'Hippolito?' Antonio was puzzled. It clearly hadn't hit him yet.

'What can we do?' Hippolito asked, recovering his composure.

'There is one thing,' said Ferdinand sternly. He looked directly at Hippolito. 'We can find Kristyan Fall.'

The doors of the chamber swung open. Antonio turned on the guard in the doorway, furious. 'We gave strict instructions!'

His voice tailed off as the guard lifted his visor. It wasn't a he, it was a she.

'Tegan?' asked the Doctor, rising from his chair.

Tegan raised a revolver and pointed it at the trio round the desk. Her face was streaming with perspiration, her lips tight and pursed. 'Doctor, you're in danger,' she stated.

'Tegan, no.'

'It's him. He told me. It's Hippolito, he wants to kill you. I must stop him.'

Hippolito stared straight down the barrel of the gun as Tegan's finger tightened on the trigger.

Chapter Seven

The Morestran sun rose like an orange eye over the imperial shipyards of Alpha Minor. It peered through clouds grown thick and salty out at sea, blown inland by the Great Nor'east Wind.

The wind picked its way through the gigantic, skeletal cranes and rusting chains that lined the quayside. Cracked concrete harbours sang as the hurtling air blew through the cylinders and pipes of long-disused engines left lying on the dockside. Glistening water fell like sheets from the hulls of six gigantic floating starships that bobbed in their moorings. Rust patches the size of houses stained the hulls and jagged black holes stared out where plexi-glass had once shielded men from space. Their markings were faded, nothing more than blisters, identification now impossible.

Through the rain and wind of the Morestran dawn, the sound of horses' hooves came ringing out. Two riders appeared from the gloom. Water streamed in their wake, thrown up by the ferocity of the gallop. The riders raced across the vast landing bowl, five miles wide, towards the shipyards. Admiral Oporto, First Star Lord of the Imperial Space Service, what remained of it, led the gallop across the burned and pitted runways. The horses weaved their way through scorched and melted landing plates.

The Admiral was an expert rider and his aide struggled to keep up. They were already two days ahead of the main party.

The Admiral reined his steed in to a canter as he stared at the wasteland ahead of him. Captain Torrance, his horse snorting steam, pulled up beside him. They looked across to the webs of cranes and their catch: the rolling starships.

'So,' said Torrance, 'they are here.'

'Indeed they are.' The Admiral pulled his hood away from his head. Rain drowned his deep black hair. His eyes glowered over a black beard. 'Three weeks. Three weeks to build a fleet.'

'According to aerial surveillance, the ships are still functional, the drives intact. Most of the corrosion seems to

be superficial. The hardest job will be patching the holes and repressurising. Look at that! What a spectacle.'

The Captain was excited, exhilarated at the scale of their task. To remobilise the imperial fleet, after fifty years. To think he was to be a part of that glorious process. And now they were here, looking down at the starships. It took his breath away.

'You really think it will be that easy?' muttered the Admiral. 'You think it is simply a matter of engineering and mechanics? Pumps and stardrives?'

'I don't understand.'

'Exactly. None of us understands. None of us can. Ships like these... their time has long passed. They were old in the last war. To steal them back from history... to reawaken them... who knows what this means?'

Captain Torrance let out an uneasy laugh. His handsome smooth face contrasted with the lined austerity of the old general. 'Religious thoughts, sir? I wouldn't have expected that from you. I thought you would be pleased.'

'Pleased? That the Morestran Empire is preparing for war once again? You're right, it does fill me with religious thoughts. Dreadful thoughts. If it is to be war, it will be our last.'

Torrance brushed rain from his face. He refused to allow the doom-laden words to get to him. This was a proud time, a good time, when the Imperium would seize back all that had been lost to the Church. He stared at the slumbering starships and saw a new age dawning, the empire great once more. He ground his spurs into his horse's flanks and rode triumphantly towards the docks.

Admiral Oporto watched his captain ride away. Already the man was dwarfed by the huge structures he was so keen to reach.

The ships in the harbour didn't look grand to him. He saw the metal spars of the substructures poking through the holes in the hulls like bones protruding from a broken body. He remembered the battles of his youth: cutlasses ringing on crowded decks, gunfire and the terrifying whoosh of a hull breach. He saw fighting men sucked into space, still locked in combat with each other.

And now they wanted to start it all over again.

The rain hammered down.

Admiral Oporto wearily pulled his hood back on and kicked his horse into action.

Protect the Doctor. Kill Hippolito.

The Doctor was speaking but it didn't make any sense to her. The man, the enemy of the Doctor, the one she had been warned about, he was sitting in front of her, wavy hair and everything. She recognised him from the photograph she'd been shown. And the Doctor was right next to him, in the line of fire from... from however the man was going to harm him. Hippolito.

Protect the Doctor. Kill Hippolito.

She knew what she should do. She had the gun trained on him, he was in her sights, what could be simpler? There was no mistake.

But the Doctor was making her stop. He was talking, while Hippolito turned white. There was no time. She had to kill him.

If only the Doctor would shut up. His voice was soothing, relaxing, jumbling up her brain. Didn't he see she was trying to protect him?

Protect the Doctor. Kill Hippolito.

'Tegan, Tegan. Think. Think now. You must remember. Someone hypnotised you, someone you remember. Ordered you to do a wrong thing, a bad thing...'

She tried to block his words out, to complete her mission, but they kept buzzing around in her mind, like annoying flies in the Australian sun.

Hippolito's jaw was moving soundlessly. He wasn't going to get away. Her finger was on the trigger, the slightest twitch would result in its detonation. How could she not fire? It was as if the Doctor's words had created a forcefield that prevented that infinitesimal last movement.

Protect the Doctor. Kill Hippolito. Then use the gun on yourself.

From the corner of her eye she caught the second man, the one who looked like a handsome version of the first, make a move.

'Stay still!' she yelled at him. He obeyed.

'Tegan,' said the Doctor, soothing, easy to listen to. 'Think about what you have been ordered to do. To take a life. Can you do that, Tegan? Do you want to?'

'I don't understand.' A flash. Something from the past. Another handsome man, very handsome, showing her the photograph, his face full of concern.

Protect the Doctor. Kill Hippolito. Then use the gun on yourself.

'You are Tegan Jovanka. You have a mind of your own. I know you want to protect me but you must realise, you have been told a lie. This man is not a threat.'

How could the Doctor be telling her this, when the truth was so apparent? Or was it? Something wasn't right. How could she have been asked to kill? It was hot in these unfamiliar clothes. Hot as Australia. Hot as Brisbane...

She caught herself drifting away and woke up just in time to see Ferdinand reaching for her. The gun went off in her hand.

The next thing she remembered was the Doctor looking down at her. Her jaw felt like it had been hit by a cannonball.

'How are you feeling?' asked the Doctor.

She tried to raise her head from the pillow but that just set off some fireworks in her brain. The jiggling of the coach in which she was clearly travelling did not help matters. Nor did the two grim-looking guards who sat beside her. She closed her eyes and hoped it would all go away.

'Where are we?' she asked.

'On the move again, I'm afraid. Your little trick didn't impress the brothers very much.'

'Oh no. What did I do?'

The Doctor smiled. Tegan felt a lot better. At least he was still on her side. 'Only tried to assassinate the most important personage in the Morestran Empire. He was, you might say, underwhelmed by the experience.'

'Ah. I suppose he was quite angry?'

'Well, he demanded your immediate execution. Which I then talked him out of.'

'Must have been quite a trick. How did you do that then?'

'Oh, by telling him you knew how to find Kristyan Fall. We're on our way to your cell, where I've got twenty-four hours to break through your post-hypnotic suggestion and find out what happened.'

Tegan groaned as the coach they were travelling in bounced over a particularly large bump.

EXTRACT: OFFICIAL COURT TRANSCRIPT – 20.01.99
NCC.

I, Scribe Thorenson, declare that this document contains a full and frank testimonial of the day's business of the IMPERIAL COURT OF MORESTRA.

Proclamation delivered by His Worship, the Chamberlain of Court.

Extract time: 12:22 to 12:31.

CHAMBERLAIN: At sixteen thirty-two hours capital time on the nineteenth day of the first month of this year 1999, a most heinous and brutal attempt was made on the lives of the regents to the empire. The intended assassin, one of the lower sex and of common birth, infiltrated court security and was able to reach the inner chambers of our most noble lords. Only their direct action was able to avert tragedy. Lord Hippolito, heir to the emperor's crown, was injured by a single shot fired from the assassin's firearm.

I can, however, reassure the court that the noble lord was not seriously injured, the bullet entering his left arm. The assassin was safely neutralised. I can report that the woman, as yet unidentified, was executed at dawn this morning, in the prescribed legal manner of termination. Officers from the elite Special Investigations Service are studying the case and are confident of a breakthrough in the near future.

However, the court will be displeased to learn that the assassin appears to have been more than a lone operative. Evidence thus far discovered points to a wide and well-organised plan of action. Lord Hippolito sends his apologies for his absence but has issued a proclamation in the light of this highly disturbing event.

The Morestran Court will recognise this proclamation.

'Under section seven of Imperial Law, the Morestran Empire is declared to be in a State of Crisis. All citizens will temporarily renounce legal and other Morestran rights. Martial Law, as defined by the thirteenth article of the constitution, will be in force. All intentions for space travel and off-planet communications must be submitted for approval by imperial officers. This State of Crisis Order to commence immediately.'

So ends the proclamation. The court recognises questions from the floor. Your Eminence?

HIS EMINENCE: This is monstrous! What is the meaning of such an outrage?

CHAMBERLAIN: Lord Hippolito's instructions are surely self-evident.

HIS EMINENCE: This is a blatant attempt to implicate the Church in a nonsensical conspiracy theory.

CHAMBERLAIN: For what purpose?

HIS EMINENCE: What do you think? To seize our documents and limit our movements.

CHAMBERLAIN: I would advise His Eminence to be careful in his choice of words. Such unwise comments will be construed as inappropriate for the court and may result in the loss of court privileges.

HIS EMINENCE: You go too far, sir. The Church will not stand for this outrage. If these acts of provocation are not halted immediately, I will leave this court and inform the Grand Council that this court is trying to start a war.

CHAMBERLAIN: It is you who go too far, Your Eminence. I must demand that you leave this chamber and will commence proceedings to revoke your privileges.

HIS EMINENCE: You must do what your masters have told you to do. I will not stay here and allow myself to be insulted in this manner. If war is what you desire, then war is what you will have.

EXTRACT ENDS.

The steamer ploughed its way across the great Morestran ocean. It would take Nyssa another three weeks to reach Valentia, the continental mass housing the Sorenson Academy.

Ferdinand had been as good as his word. Although almost every man at the port had seemed bemused by the sight of Nyssa wearing the robes of a Special Investigations officer, her credentials were impressive enough to get her on board ship. The few that stared too hard were quickly dissuaded by the sight of Harwood standing resolutely by her side.

The sociology of this odd empire both fascinated and appalled Nyssa, but she tried to keep her own moral judgement separate from a more detached observation.

There were women on this planet, although they seemed permanently swathed in hoods and yashmaks. Nyssa never saw them except in big groups, never speaking, never looking at anyone. Harwood told her a little, that women were considered a different caste from the men. They were known as the lesser sex... she had to fight hard to remain detached at that one.

As they boarded the great steam liner, her disgust at the sexism gave way to wonder concerning the evolution of the technology. The ship must have once been nuclear-powered; it had the smooth arrowed bows and decks that hallmarked the design as such. However, the decks had been burrowed out and two massive steam chimneys rammed deep inside. She could hear the pistons straining and pounding as they left harbour.

While the Doctor had told her about his previous encounter with the Morestrans, during the week on the stealth ship, his recollections were clearly out of date. Two thousand years ago perhaps there had been a thriving technology but that era was long past. Nyssa marvelled at the incongruities of the contrasts between old and new. Hover cars pulled by sweating horses, telegraph wires spilling from sub-space communication towers. Soldiers with toughened plastic armour while swords dangled from belts. And monks, lots of them, everywhere.

Harwood informed her that many of the monks were actually scribes: couriers and note-takers bred in their thousands for the task of recording and delivering information. The Morestrans were obsessed with bureaucracy and record-keeping. He also said, without a hint of irony, that many of these scribes would be killed on arrival, to prevent their messages going any further than those they were intended for. The scribes considered this execution a great honour. Nyssa found this more than a little difficult to believe and assumed Harwood possessed a very dry sense of humour.

These scribes, she reasoned, must have emerged from a society once used to the speed and accuracy of computer technology. When that was no longer freely available, an information-hungry empire had to plug the gap. With unlimited manpower and a fiercely aggressive and paranoid culture, she presumed, the development of the scribe was a natural answer to that problem.

On the afternoon of the third day, Nyssa went on deck. Although the wind was up, the sun was warm and she decided to stretch out a little. She leaned against the railings and stared down into the foaming azure water. She wondered whether the Doctor and Tegan were in similarly pleasant surroundings. Tegan had seemed like she needed a holiday. The Doctor too for that matter, after all those dreams.

A white-uniformed officer approached her. The man was young and impeccably smart. Nyssa noticed his acned face and saw that he couldn't have been more than eighteen.

'Lovely day,' she said and smiled, meaning it. The wind caught her hair and plumped it round her face. Delicious.

'Women aren't allowed on deck. Get below.' The officer was pompous and self-satisfied but Nyssa saw the red stain growing across his face. He didn't know how to handle the situation.

'I beg your pardon,' she responded politely. 'If you were to address me with civility I might be more inclined to listen to what you have to say.'

He was stuck. He hadn't expected this. 'I .. I'm not telling you again,' he stuttered. 'Get below. That's an order.'

They stood like that for a few seconds. Nyssa gazed coolly, while the officer shuffled and coughed. Then Harwood appeared out of nowhere and broke the young man's nose.

Blood poured over his white uniform. Nyssa was so stunned she was unable to react when Harwood picked up the bleeding youth and threw him over the deck rail. Somewhere in the distance there came a faint splash.

Nyssa ran to the rail and looked agonisingly down into the churning ocean. Of the officer there was no sign.

'You... you murdered him!' she shrieked.

Harwood was rock, utterly unmoving.

'Harwood!' she bellowed.

At last, he looked at her and Nyssa saw that something very bad must have happened to him because his eyes were completely clear, completely unfazed by what he had just done. She stepped away from him. 'Why?' she whispered.

At last, animation seeped into his features. 'You wear the badge of a Special Investigator, you better act like one.' His voice was full of nails, an accent thick and uncompromising. 'Call it a lesson.'

Nyssa, oddly, wasn't bothered by anyone else for the rest of the voyage.

What do you remember? asked the Doctor.

A man. A tall man with blue eyes.

Where was this?

I don't know. I remember a mountain, a storm. Great windows. He was good-looking, the man. He smiled and said I could trust him. He told me he wanted to help the Doctor. That the Doctor was in trouble and that people who knew him from before were after him and they wanted him dead.

Did he tell you his name?

No. Yes. He said he was a Christian. We had a meal. He laughed a lot, he was very... very charming. Concerned...

Think back. Think back to that time. When you were at this meal. When he spoke to you. How did you know who wanted to kill the Doctor?

He showed me a photograph. Told me this man was very high up, very powerful, that I would have to be careful. That there was nothing more important than to protect the Doctor, that I was never to leave his side.

How did he know who the Doctor was?

He said there were tapes, videotapes. From long ago, when the Doctor had saved them. He asked about the TARDIS. I told him about the Cybermen, the Master; Adric. I told him how I watched you change from... from him into you. He talked about monsters, about how he was trying to continue the Doctor's work, to help save the empire.

In what way?

Something's wrong on the Tower. He's putting it right. But it's all very difficult for him. He has many enemies. Enemies of the Doctor. They want to stop what the Doctor began. Lying to him, pretending to help. But really, it's all a trap. They want to kill him.

Tegan, this is very important. Did he tell you what he was going to do after you had helped the Doctor? What was he going to do next?

I... he didn't say... I don't know.

Anything, any clue. How was he putting the Tower right? What was he doing to help?

He didn't say. I want to remember but there's nothing.

Think, Tegan, think.

I can't. I trusted him. The project. The Zeta Project. Zeta Major.

Zeta Major?

Something happened. A message. To do with the project. I overheard him. Zeta Major.

The emergency klaxons woke d'Undine, new chairman of the Zeta Project. He had been dreaming of a wide open beach he remembered from the sunny monasteries of Alpha Minor. He was just looking at the sky, the beautiful blue sky, relishing the open space, the light.

The harsh drilling bells snapped him awake in a second. Part of his training with the Service. He leapt out of his bunk, which he'd had moved to his office. He knew before he got the message: it had happened again.

'Where?' he barked.

'The Lesser Ward! We're in trouble!' yelled the tinny voice of Sister Elsa. D'Undine heard the thumps of bullets and the snarls in the background.

'God's tears,' d'Undine swore, snapping his gunbelt into place around his burgeoning waist.

Within five minutes he was entering the Lesser Ward, just a quick trip on the monorail. Already he could hear the shots being fired and the high-pitched growls, this time without the benefit of the intercom filter.

He pulled up in the circular entrance chamber. The main defensive gate was down and yellow lights whirled and flashed. Nuns mixed with soldiers, several bearing scratches and seeping wounds. Sister Ilsa, her hood ripped away and cropped blonde hair gleaming in the light, was shouting orders.

'Situation?' snapped d'Undine.

'Two. Suddenly went,' said Ilsa, out of breath. 'They've breached their cells and are out in the access corridors. We've lost six, including Sister Arnold.'

'This is a bad mistake.'

'We had no warning.'

'You shouldn't have needed one.' D'Undine whistled up a squad, watching the gate. 'I want flame-throwers, now. Get that gate up.'

The men reorganised themselves into battle formation, swords drawn. A corporal thumped the gate release. It raised

itself gently, maddeningly unaware of the crisis. The corridor ahead was dark and empty.

Not quite empty. As they watched, a shrivelled shape in a nun's habit appeared out of nowhere, its tightened skin already disintegrating.

'Move,' said d'Undine.

Expertly, the squad began to make their way cautiously towards the hatches leading to the main labs. A roar from ahead froze them. The flame-thrower ops took position, flanked by the rest of the squad. D'Undine followed, pistol raised. They could hear the creatures raging inside the lab. Expensive, d'Undine thought to himself.

The corporal at point repeated his door-opening procedure.

This time, what was behind it wasn't quiet and empty. Before the hatch was fully open, before anyone could react, a taloned hand was reaching for his throat. The creature, once a woman, was on him. Her white patient's gown billowed round her.

'Fire!' shouted d'Undine. The soldiers obeyed instinctively.

Two jets of liquid flame consumed the creature and the unlucky corporal. The access corridor was suddenly a roaring, orange oven. The burning figures twisted and screamed as the flesh dripped off them. Black smoke plumed from their bodies.

'Cease fire!' d'Undine ordered. The jets died away, leaking a burning trail to the writhing victims. The creature and the corporal stopped their cries and dropped, nothing more than smoking crisps, to the soot-blackened floor. The creature twitched, its tremendous will still trying to reknit molten bones, when the rest of the squad moved in and hacked it to pieces with their swords. D'Undine held a cloth to his face, his throat racked with coughing and eyes streaming from the smoke. There was no air, just heat.

'Right, it's dead. Move on!'

The main lab of Lesser Ward was in blackout, the lights clearly having fused in the recent struggle. As the squad deployed, alert for movement, d'Undine was glad of the fresh oxygen. He couldn't smell the odours from the opened bodies strewn around the laboratory. Clearly, the creatures hadn't waited to freeze-dry these.

The partitions and shattered glass panels turned this place into a maze. Dozens of operating tables had been pulled

apart, their surgical equipment spilt, making it even more difficult to find the last creature. The squad, despite themselves, were making a terrible racket.

They found the beast at last, trying to pound its way into Cell Four, which was full of terrified patients. It didn't pay the soldiers any attention, just kept banging away at the metal door, even when the flame-throwers had turned it into a ball of angry fire.

Within two days of the assassination attempt, Lord Hippolito was back at work. His damaged arm was supported by a white sling but otherwise he appeared to the outside world completely on top of the situation.

Antonio was out of the office, working on the Doctor's unlikely anti-matter conspiracy theories, getting nowhere, so Hippolito had time to think. He smoked his pipe as he did so. Idly, his spare hand tugged his short, well-groomed beard.

He was glad that he had held his temper concerning the punishment of the girl Tegan. Antonio had been baying for blood but he had been clear-headed enough to realise they needed her. And in a week, this open-faced man who insisted on calling himself the Doctor had pulled some very useful information out of her. Useful, but true? Hippolito hadn't made up his mind.

What was clear was that twice now someone had tried to kill the most powerful members of the Morestran families. One success, Duke Angelo, and one near miss. This Tegan might babble on about Kristyan Fall but he was yet to be convinced. It was more likely that the Doctor and Ferdinand had put the name into her female head.

And maybe the whole story was just a pack of lies.

He was interested in the Doctor. He had spent hours arguing with Antonio about him. Was it possible, really possible, that he could be the man he said he was? That he had come back to oversee the genesis of something he had begun two thousand years ago?

Decades in politics told him no. Impossible. He was insane. But these were strange times, religious times. Despite their struggles with the Church, they all wanted the Energy Tower to work. The problem was *Leyenda Negra*. The reason they were at each other's throats all the time was that nobody believed in it any more. Neither them nor those fat gangsters who called themselves priests.

If there was even a grain of truth in the anti-matter theory then something had gone terribly wrong. Maybe, just maybe, there was some truth to this Doctor's statement. Maybe he had returned to put them on the right track, to get the Tower completed and give the Morestrans all their technology back.

The more he thought about the anti-matter, the less he believed in it. Didn't *Leyenda Negra* contain quotes from the Doctor himself concerning the impossibility of removing these crystals from the gateway planet? He tried to recall his scripture classes. What was the Doctor was supposed to have said? 'You shan't be allowed to leave.'

Perhaps. But the truth of the matter was that whosoever he may be, they had him. Him and the girl. They had him and the Church didn't. They just had to make sure they could keep him.

Was it Kristyan Fall stirring up trouble? He didn't think so. A far more plausible explanation was that the Church wanted a war to deflect attention from the imminent failure of the Energy Tower. Assassinating the enemy commanders was a logical opening move. Hippolito would have ordered a similar first strike if he had that job to do.

Ferdinand had to be wrong. There was no reason for the Zero Man to come back from the dead along with the Doctor.

Kristyan Fall was dead. Had been dead for five years. The identification at the spaceport had been incorrect.

There was a ring on his desk communicator. 'Hippolito,' he stated simply.

It was Antonio. He was excited, letting it show, pushing. Hippolito had warned him about that. 'I've got someone on the comm,' he said. 'Someone we should speak to.'

'Put him through,' he said flatly.

'Lord Hippolito,' came the deep voice, 'I have a proposition for you.'

Ferdinand had been pacing around the palace, kept under wraps by the brothers for a week now. The chambers he had been given were pleasant, opulent even, but without work he felt as if he were imprisoned.

He had been given limited access to the Doctor and Tegan. The girl was recuperating from Fall's nasty little trick.

The Doctor explained that he had broken through the posthypnotic block and that Tegan needed only rest to help her recover completely. He suggested that if Ferdinand had

nothing better to do he might spend some time talking to her, tell her about Morestran life. Ferdinand found himself warming to the idea. There was something about Tegan, a fiery spirit, that reminded him of Castiza.

In return he had requested the files in the Special Investigations library relating to Kristyan Fall. The Doctor was very interested. He wanted to know about the man who had nearly killed his companion.

The brothers had rubber-stamped the request. Ferdinand knew that by their agreement they didn't believe his story about Fall. The files arrived from SIS headquarters under armed guard.

The Doctor blew the dust from the file and indicated the vertical black ribbon pinned to its cover.

'It means "closed",' said Ferdinand mockingly.

He ordered a samovar of green tea from the serving girls and together they sat down to read. There were no photographs.

First name: Kristyan. Height: 183 centimetres; weight: 76 kilograms; slim build; eyes: blue; hair: black; scar down right cheek and on left shoulder; all-round athlete; expert pistol shot, close-quarter fighter, knife-thrower; various disguises and aliases; proven interrogation and hypnotic suggestion abilities. Languages: Morestran Common, High Church; vices: drink, but not to excess, and women. Known to accept bribes but unlikely to prove reliable in extortion.

This man is invariably armed with a .38 automatic pistol carried in a holster under his left arm. Magazine holds eight rounds. Has been known to carry a knife strapped to his left forearm; has used technological devices. In general, fights with tenacity and has a high tolerance of pain.

Known cases: Assassination of six imperial nobles, including one system governor (see Appendix A); believed to have been Head of Church Service: Operation Brutus successfully infiltrating the Cult of Science (see Appendix B).

Conclusion: This man is a dangerous Church operative and spy. He has worked for the Church Service since 1978 NCC and now holds the secret number '0' in that Service. The Zero number signifies an agent who is authorised to use illegal technology on active service. There are believed to be only two other Church Service agents with this authority. If

encountered in the field, full details are to be reported to headquarters (see SIS Standing Orders 202 for procedures).

And with the file, an amendment.

Report dated: 18.04.93.

Kristyan Fall a.k.a. the Zero Man was positively identified by SIS agent #48 on Alpha Minor following a shooting between members of the Cult of Science, Fall and another agent.

Eyewitness survivors from the incident corroborate evidence suggesting Kristyan Fall was shot by suspected Church Service agent Kavelli (see File: Church Service current). The execution style of delivery suggests that the Church had discovered Fall's numerous self-financed non-Church-related operations and terminated him.

Kavelli's whereabouts currently remain unknown.

KRISTYAN FALL to be considered deceased. All relevant files to be amended accordingly.

As the Doctor closed the files, Ferdinand saw the worry on his face. 'You were right,' he said slowly. 'A very dangerous man.'

Chapter Eight

The screening room was full of smoke. The man was shaking as he refilled and relit his pipe. His brother paced relentlessly. He kicked at one of the skeletal metal chairs facing the projector screen.

'He's late,' he said.

The older brother inhaled deeply. He breathed out two huge snorts of purple smoke. 'He'll be here. He's probably working out whether we're going to double-cross him.'

'If it was him.' The younger brother sounded suddenly doubtful.

'It was him.'

Hippolito couldn't stop thinking about the lie.

It had all been so simple. The lie was the lie (or even The Lie). Everyone who mattered had always known. Who had actually come up with the idea? The facts were lost in a maze of secrets, riddles, double bluffs and deceit. All Hippolito knew for certain was that one hundred years after the Sorenson Academy had been established to unlock the secrets of planetary movement, somebody came up with a story. A very frightening story. In fact, a story so frightening that the good citizens of the Morestran Empire would throw themselves into two millennia of poverty and slavery in its name.

The deal. A lie. But a good convincing lie. *Leyenda Negra*. The Black Legend. A two-thousand-year-old pact to bind the empire, to get the Tower built.

The Tower, like death, was inevitable.

The door opened, casting a rectangle of light through the smoke-filled projection room.

'Gentlemen,' came a rich brown voice. The man walked in.

Hippolito drew heavily on his pipe. Antonio stopped pacing and stood tapping his foot nervously on the tiled floor.

The man wore a smart grey suit and carried a small black box. He walked to the video projector across the room, ignoring the brothers. He flipped the box open and produced a video cassette. 'It's a copy,' he said simply and pushed the cassette into the machine.

Antonio turned out the lights and joined Hippolito in a seat. The man in grey smiled. To Hippolito it was the smile of a big jungle cat. 'I have edited the various log entries together. So there's more of a story. It's quite good.'

He pushed the playback button.

On the screen: an old, old picture, scoured with lightning-style tracking lines. A rushing tunnel of colours and odd whistling sounds. The images flickered over the man in grey. 'Video feedback,' he stated. 'Any second now.'

Space. A planet in the distance. No stars.

Zoom in on the planet. Purple.

Cut to: a jungle. Oddly lit, purple and red light. Strange fleshy vegetation. Something disturbing, not right. Pan across to a door. We see a Morestran 'instant house' – prefabricated plastic survival dome, a relic of the old empire.

The door opens and a white-haired, white-bearded man walks out into the jungle. He is tired, drawn out, watchful. He wears the brown overalls and white boots of the Science Service. He carries a metal identity plaque.

He walks to a freshly dug grave...

Tegan found her mind clearing. She remembered nothing about her missing week, and decided that her subconscious had deliberately lost that time to prevent the mental lock recurring. The Doctor had worked hard on her and she felt as if he had run a cloth through her head, wiping away the dust. The world seemed clearer, brighter.

Ferdinand had asked her if she would accompany him on a boating trip on the palace lake. She had agreed, tiring of the heavy scented luxury of the interior. Her bedchamber was incredible but it was starting to remind her of Turkish delight: nice to pick at but you wouldn't want to live off it.

Ferdinand rowed her out from the marble jetty into the centre of the clear green water. If this had been Earth, Tegan would have said it was a beautiful spring day in Italy, on Lake Maggiore. The spires of the palace dominated one shore, on the others a lush forest.

Ferdinand was so charming that she barely recognised him as the grim policeman who had hauled them away from the spaceport. She had thought he would be difficult to get on with, especially after what she had done, but he seemed to be genuinely interested in her.

'You said something before about vengeance,' she said. 'You don't seem the type to me. Not now. What happened?'

Ferdinand was staring upwards, remembering events long past. 'They took my sister, eighteen years ago. Our house is noble but our wealth was destroyed in the last civil war. We were living in the family home, Epsilon Major. Castiza was fifteen, just a girl.'

'What happened?'

'The planetary Cardinal was besotted with her. Kept plaguing her, wouldn't leave her alone. She wanted nothing to do with him, warned him away. So, the Cardinal waited until I was here on Alpha, paying tribute to the court, then took her. I came back and she was gone. The Cardinal himself told me they had found forbidden technology in the family house and had had her conscripted. I didn't find her for four years.'

'But you did find her?' Tegan gripped the side of the little boat. A wind was starting up. Gentle waves began to rock them.

'Oh yes. I dedicated my life to finding her. Travelled through system after system. They'd put her in a nunnery, once they'd finished with her. The Order of Perpetual Enlightenment.'

'What's that?'

'Somewhere to sweep the rubbish. They couldn't kill her, not a noble, not with me still around. So they made sure she couldn't speak to anyone.'

'How?'

'It's a silent order. They have a creed that nuns must never contaminate themselves with earthly communication. To save themselves for God.'

'Yes, but surely she could still speak?'

'Not really. As a sign of dedication and faith the Mother Superior cut out her tongue.'

Tegan just stared.

She saw the anger, the madness on his face. The Ferdinand from the coach was back. When he spoke, his words burned. 'When she saw me, she couldn't live with the shame. Castiza poisoned herself on the journey to Epsilon.'

Tegan dropped her head. 'I'm sorry. What did you do then?'

'I went home and killed the Cardinal. I was arrested and taken to the imperial court for trial. The brothers, Hippolito

and Antonio, realised what I was willing to do and decided to employ me in their new Special Investigations Service. They gave me a mandate to discredit the Church and that's what I've been trying to do ever since. I've been responsible for the deaths, suicides and shaming of over twenty Church officials.'

Ferdinand relaxed. He seemed satisfied, his story told. He looked back at the shore. The wind had increased.

'And does that help?' asked Tegan.

'What do you think?'

Dark clouds were beginning to gather over the lake. Their shadows moved like boulders across the water. 'We'd better go back,' said Tegan. 'It's getting cold.'

Barldvin was unlucky. Everyone in his village told him so. If a cart overturned, it was his. If the cattle caught the fever, it would be his herd that was decimated. If a tile fell from a roof it would land on his head.

He had tilled the soil on Ursus for his whole life, following his father's death at the ripe old age of fifty-eight. His father had been a jolly man, robust and healthy. In his lifetime, through prudent, clever techniques, he had brought the farm up from subsistence to a thriving business, striking deals that sent his grain off-world for good profit. He had married three women and sired five children, one of them actually travelling to the Academy.

Their family was respected, even successful. The rumour was that they were descended from Baldwin, one of the disciples on the Sorenson Expedition (which, had Barldvin known it, might have been the source of his infamous bad luck).

So when the old man died, Barldvin inherited a thriving, profitable concern.

Which made it all the worse when, through no fault of his own, everything went wrong.

Storms flattened his crops, the worst storms in living memory. Disease and blight struck everywhere, levelling his family at one fell stroke. Even his wife, a village girl, turned out to be a witch, the local minister finding an old battered radio and wristwatch in her mother's house. Barldvin cried when they burnt her, her mother and the rest of her family. He knew then he was cursed.

From that moment on, it appeared that the Dark Gods had emerged from their gateway early and for amusement had agreed to make his life hell. Within two years everything was gone. The farm collapsed, his children succumbed to an incredible variety of poxes, he was blinded in one eye by a shard of falling ice.

So, by the time the leaflets arrived promising a new life for those willing to put themselves forward for this latest stage in the building of the Energy Tower, he decided enough was enough. He walked twenty miles to the district capital, to the spaceship, and signed up.

Mind you, he wasn't the only one. There were plenty of volunteers. He didn't know any of them. Fair enough, even people he knew avoided him once word had got round of his legendary bad luck. He was glad that he would have the chance to make a new start.

Like most of the population of the Morestran Empire, scratching a living from the soil, banned from employing even rudimentary machinery, Barldvin dreamed of *Torre del Oro*. The New Age. The Time of Fulmination.

It made it easier to bear, the hardship, the constant work, knowing that it was all in a right and just cause. Of course, the Tower was mainly there to keep the Gate closed, to keep the Dark Ones out, but if Barldvin was honest with himself, and he had always tried to be honest even when he was starving, what he really looked forward to were the benefits that would directly apply to him. Power and energy for all. They would build machines again, everyone would be rich. Barldvin imagined himself living like a prince, back in his pampered childhood, allowed to drive motorised vehicles, fire energy weapons, live in houses heated by electricity. And the best thing was that it would happen in his lifetime. Two thousand years of servitude by his ancestors and he would be the one to enjoy it.

Sometimes he thought that his terrible luck was simply some kind of process for getting all the bad things out of the way, ready for the good things. This time next year, they would all be happy and his bad luck would be a thing of the past.

They shoved him into a holding pen, bundled next to a hundred other Ursan peasants all dreaming the same dream as him. The ship lifted off.

Barldvin had nothing left to leave behind. Nothing but the future. He had never even been in space before.

He got talking to the man next to him. An eighteen-year-old youth called Siemens. As they sat in their metal box they talked endlessly of the wonders the Energy Tower would bring. Siemens was the twelfth son of a poor family. When his father eventually died his brothers would carve the land up, leaving him nothing. He was glad to be doing something for *Torre del Oro*, perhaps they would even witness its start-up procedures. That would be something to tell their inevitable grandchildren. They might even get Secondwives, just for pleasure.

The journey lasted three months. During that time they received no instructions, no orders concerning what they would be doing when they got to wherever it was they were going.

Still, even though the hold had started to fill up with the stink of bodies, Barldvin was happy. Whatever it was, it couldn't be worse than what he had left behind.

They docked and the black guards led them into cold metal cells. A few of the volunteers started to voice dissent and were told to keep quiet and wait. Still, Barldvin didn't despair, he had escaped the curse, he would no longer be taunted, he was in a place where no one knew his nicknames.

In fact, Barldvin managed to keep his optimism going until they led him into the laboratory and Brother Body opened him up and sewed anti-matter crystals into his stomach.

Cardinal Mantrus rushed to the Arch-Cardinal's chambers as soon as he received the summons. His legs cramped with arthritis but he knew his master didn't like to be kept waiting. Especially not now. The Arch-Cardinal, at the moment, was very bad.

He had decided he was next in line for assassination; a secret revenge attack in retaliation for the death of Duke Angelo and the attempt on the life of the royal brothers. He had restricted his public appearances and never went anywhere without first strapping on full body armour, making him look even plumper beneath his holy robes of office.

He had a taster for his food, had increased to eighteen his personal retinue, who stayed with him at all times, and had two unwilling doubles appearing in public around Alpha Major

ready to take a bullet selflessly for their spiritual leader. Worst of all, and Mantrus was particularly affected by this one, the fool had taken to dreaming up insane conspiracy theories and getting the Cardinal out of bed in the middle of the night to explain them to him. He would sit in his four-poster cot, Energy Tower bas-relief stretching over his head, and babble sweatily about how the families were poisoning his soup, or hiding dead sheep in the air ducts to make him sick.

Mantrus hoped that this wasn't going to be one of the long rambling ones; the complicated ones involving hordes of untrustworthy guards, backstabbing Churchmen and intricate death machines. He didn't think he could cope with much more.

The old Cardinal bowed low at the foot of His Eminence's bedchamber. The retinue, unpredictably, had been dismissed and Mantrus was alone with the Arch-Cardinal. His nightcap flopped over his forehead and his florid face reminded Mantrus of a clown.

'Your Eminence?'

The Arch-Cardinal clutched Mantrus's hand. 'Kristyan Fall. New orders.'

'From Archetryx?'

'Indeed. He is to be found and returned. It has been decided to remove him from leadership of the Zeta Project. He has been found guilty of treason.'

'What's happened?'

'Apparently, his men have staged some sort of coup. They executed a number of our most trusted officials, including the chief executive. It's all gone completely out of control. They've lost contact with the Tower. Fall's men have taken over. They want him dispatched to Archetryx immediately.'

Mantrus was puzzled. 'With respect, Your Eminence, how does this affect us? Our attempt to bring in Fall met with abject failure. None of our intelligence operatives knows where he is. He has most likely left the planet.'

The Arch-Cardinal became even more agitated. 'Don't say that! I don't want to hear that!'

Mantrus looked into his eyes. 'What have you done?'

'Nothing. Nothing. I mean, we'll get him, won't we? Soon. It's just a matter of time.'

'You've told Archetryx we've got him, haven't you?'

'No!' The Arch-Cardinal looked away. His lower lip was pouting. The idiot was just a petulant child. 'All right, yes. It's

not my fault. I had it on good faith that our men would bring him in.'

But you couldn't wait, could you, thought Mantrus. You had to grab the glory. And now we're all for it.

'What can we do? Mantrus, you're my chief adviser, advise me. What can I do?'

'Well,' Mantrus began.

'We've got to find him. Bring him in. Or it'll be me on that shuttle to Archetryx. And you, I'll make sure of that. In the name of the gods, what can we do?'

The Arch-Cardinal was practically crying. Mantrus tried to hide his disgust. This man was going to get himself executed and take the rest of them with him.

He thought for a moment. 'There is one thing, but it's risky.' His seamed face pointed forward, like an eager crow.

'Anything, anything.'

'We tell Archetryx Kristyan Fall is dead. Killed himself in custody.'

'They'll never believe us. Habeas corpus, they'll say. Produce the body. And what if Fall turns up somewhere?'

'That's the trick,' said Mantrus slyly. 'We'll have to find him first. Find him and kill him.'

Ferdinand was starting to worry. The Doctor and Tegan were entertaining companions but, like him, were clearly suffering from the two-week wait the brothers had made them all endure. The Doctor especially was increasingly withdrawing into himself, locking himself away for long periods. He seemed to be suffering from some kind of headache. Ferdinand had made his mind up about this man now He believed him. They'd talked about his visit to Zeta Minor, about travelling in this TARDIS, and the Doctor obviously knew more than any impostor could. And if he was the Doctor it made sense that his story about what was on the Tower was also true.

Ferdinand wanted action, any sort of action. He ached to get to the Energy Tower, to smash it apart and destroy the Church. This was the big chance, he could break them for ever. If there was anti-matter up there, it would bring them down once and for all. And to hell with everything else. He never believed the thing would work anyway. Just make the decision! Surely it had to be worth it.

Finally, a message arrived from the brothers. The waiting was over.

‘At last,’ said Tegan, in that abrupt manner he had got used to over the last fortnight. She was so unlike most Morestran women. They were placid, unintelligent and chunky; breeding machines, used for nothing but work and pleasure. Tegan was different. So different.

She had elected to wear the clothes of a Morestran noblewoman and Ferdinand admitted to himself he found her ridiculously attractive. Her will, her outspoken nature, her beauty. She suited the simple green hood that framed her strong face. Not that she would ever look at him, and not that he would ever attempt to take legal possession of her. But he couldn’t get her out of his mind.

They rode the coach back to the court in silence, each bound up in new thoughts and worries. Ferdinand trusted the brothers – he had worked for them for a long time, in fact he owed them his life in the service – but he also knew how mercenary they could be. And with the future of the Energy Tower at stake, well, who knew what they would decide to do? His own view was that they would agree with the Doctor and organise a punitive expedition to the Tower. If they were lucky they would have spent the last two weeks organising it. He made up his mind to be on that expedition when it went. No one was going to leave him out of this.

‘I wonder how Nyssa’s getting on,’ said Tegan.

The Doctor didn’t reply, just leaned back into the coach cushions.

‘She should be there by now,’ replied Ferdinand, wanting to make conversation. ‘She’ll be safe enough with Harwood to protect her.’

‘I hope so,’ said Tegan. ‘I don’t think I like this “Planet of Sexism” you’ve got here.’

‘Right,’ replied Ferdinand. He simply didn’t know what to say.

‘We’ve come to a decision,’ said Hippolito.

The Doctor breathed a sigh of relief. The old itch was back in his head and the waiting was stretching even his phenomenal patience.

They sat round a conference table, somewhere in the huge offices in the Lords’ chambers. The inevitable samovar of tea squatted on the table between them and the brothers.

‘We can’t afford not to investigate your story,’ said Antonio. ‘We’re sending the stealth ship back to the Energy Tower.’

The Doctor noticed Ferdinand trying unsuccessfully to conceal a smile. ‘That is good news,’ he said, looking slyly at the Doctor.

‘You leave tomorrow,’ continued Hippolito. The two brothers really were a double act, although the Doctor had already worked out that one was the brains, the other the looks. He imagined that when the time came for the new emperor to be inaugurated, Antonio would take the throne while Hippolito worked away in the background.

‘How many are going?’

‘You three obviously, along with a specially picked group of men.’

‘And you?’ asked Tegan. The Doctor contained a wince. He was all for Tegan speaking her mind but in this culture it would have been nice if she could have compromised for once. Especially after her last encounter with the most powerful men in the empire.

Hippolito lit his pipe. The Doctor had known some pipes in his time, but this had to be a new universal record in air pollution.

‘We will be there at the launch to make sure everything runs smoothly but the situation here is too delicate for us to go missing now.’

‘What is the situation?’ asked Ferdinand.

‘We’re on the brink of civil war,’ replied Antonio smoothly. ‘Thanks mainly to your handling of Duke Angelo. And your –’ with this he turned his gaze to Tegan – ‘little trick with the guard’s uniform.’

‘That wasn’t my fault,’ said Tegan sheepishly.

‘It was Kristyan Fall. You know that.’ The Doctor was surprised how quickly Ferdinand leapt to her defence.

‘On that particular matter,’ said Hippolito philosophically, ‘there is still some doubt. After all, no one has yet come across this dead man.’

‘How quickly can we reach the Tower?’ asked the Doctor.

‘Sixteen days. It’s in a remote system. The stealth ship was designed for secrecy, not speed.’

‘Let’s hope it’s quick enough.’

‘Right,’ said Hippolito. ‘You’d better get yourselves ready. And don’t worry, Doctor, the situation is under our full control.’

I predict a swift conclusion to this crisis. If there's nothing else?'

The smoking man was smug now, no doubt because he felt he was about to win a final victory over the Church. Well, the Doctor didn't care how he did it. He had to get back there and retrieve the TARDIS. He had a plan. He only hoped his mind would stay intact long enough for him to see it come to fruition.

'Thank you, Lord Hippolito. And Lord Antonio.'

'Not at all,' said Antonio. 'Very soon, I think this whole matter will have reached a satisfactory resolution.'

COMMUNIQUÉ – ZETA PROJECT – URGENT KRISTYAN FALL – 03.02.99 NCC.

Just a quick word to update you on the status of the project. Your previous orders have now been fully expedited. The takeover was less stressful than predicted. Once Apothecary Boyd was dealt with, the other faithful members of the management team quickly reassessed their priorities and allied themselves to our cause. In total only three Church members offered resistance and were relocated in the appropriate manner. Unexpectedly, one of these turned out to be Brother Haw, who proved less than helpful in transferring his priorities to the new cause. This has left an unhelpful gap in the treatment of our patients.

Following this, we have now discovered that Brother Haw's interference was the cause of the anti-matter imbalances that have been such a nuisance to the project. As you may or may not know, several patients received overdoses and became active too soon, resulting in three incidents, one of them serious.

You will be pleased to note that all these incidents have been dealt with and the project is once more running smoothly. In fact, we believe that we could handle an increase in turnover of an extra eight per cent, a margin I am certain will prove acceptable to you. I have taken it upon myself to charter an extra trip this week with the intent of procuring the requisite number of specimens. I take it you have no objections, but if you do, let me know and I will dispose of the surplus immediately.

I hope matters relating to the project are running as smoothly elsewhere and look forward to a rapid opening of our favourite Tower. Good luck, old friend.

D'Undine

COMMUNIQUÉ – ZETA PROJECT – URGENT D'UNDINE – 16.02.99 NCC.

Thank you for your note dated 03.02.99. I am very pleased to hear that you have overcome your teething troubles. Don't worry, I expected some challenges to arise from the takeover and believe you have handled the situation well. You were right in thinking I was surprised by the behaviour of Br Haw. He seemed one of our keenest new apostles. I don't think you could have anticipated his reaction to the situation.

Yes, the eight per cent extra is good news. I calculate we can bring forward the Time of Fulmination by two days at the least. By all means get moving on this.

I was a little unhappy to hear of Sister Ilsa's mishandling of your 'incident' in the Lesser Ward. Once we are on-line I will take appropriate steps. Thank you for bringing the matter to my attention.

The situation out here has been dogged by one or two discrepancies but I am fully in control and am confident that matters will be resolved shortly.

Keep me informed of everything.

Zero

Chapter Nine

Excerpt from 'THE WATCHTOWER' – underground manuscript broadsheet printed and produced by unknown subversive elements at the Sorenson Academy. Document seized: 19.02.99 New Church Calendar.

THE SIS FILES!!!

Yes!! We're back! Some of you young folk on campus won't remember us but now we've met we guarantee you won't forget us.

We had a little trouble with the authorities some time ago. A slight matter of the seizing of a printing press... nothing serious, nothing that a few choice executions (we mean expulsions) didn't sort out.

But, like a bad smell beneath a student's habit, we linger on.

The Watchtower is the friar in the ointment, the pain in the cloisters, the witness in the woods, keeping our beady eyes open for all the to-ings and fro-ings here for you privileged folk of the esteemed Sorenson Academy, where everything is always holy and pure – until we lift the cassock!!

For instance, let's talk about why the Special Investigations Service have just arrived to administrate what they're calling an extraordinary audit in the Academy. As is well documented, the SIS is nothing but a reactionary imperialist puppet organisation dedicated to spreading sedition within the structures of the Church. Indeed, this very periodical, your very own Watchtower, was once accused by our masters of being a subversive propaganda vehicle funded by that very same organisation!!

Hopefully, our investigations into this matter should prove to all just where our loyalties lie in this year of the Great Fulmination.

So, dear reader old or new, we will uncover the truth. We will find out why the auditor is here. And why the auditor is a woman!!!

'This is where it all began,' said the Dean. His words were a litany, worn smooth with overuse. 'Two thousand years ago, Professor Sorenson, upon his return from the Planet of Evil, gave his name to this Academy. It was the dawn of the New Age. Since then we have laboured day and night to find the solution to the Great Scheme: the harnessing of kinetic energy derived from the movement of planetary bodies, as spoken of by the Prophet Doctor himself. It took a hundred years for the concept of *Torre del Oro* to emerge and another nineteen hundred to build it. This very year our work will be complete. The Morestran Empire will live once more. Ah, these are interesting times.' He eyed Nyssa slyly, gauging her reaction. She remained impassive.

'And how are you finding our Academy, Lady Nyssa?' They were strolling through the campus grounds. This was her first evening here.

Nyssa concealed a smile. Actually, it was very different from what she had expected. For the Morestran Empire this was almost civilised. The Academy reminded her of some of the schools of learning on Traken. The buildings were low, light and modern. Carefully maintained lawns created an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity and the facilities were excellent. A gentle breeze from the nearby sea kept the air fresh and stimulated both her body and her mind. But she had to remember what Harwood had taught her.

'Adequate, Dean,' she said dismissively, 'adequate.'

'I am so glad.' He almost fell over his robes trying to defer to her.

Nyssa asked about a large collection of drab, perfunctory high-rise blocks, the only eyesore within the grounds. They seemed slovenly, depressing, in such a beautiful landscape.

'Student halls of residence,' the Dean replied. 'This is a religious establishment. On conscription to the Academy, students are required to bind themselves to a strictly enforced vow of poverty. Staple food, hessian clothing, unheated cells to sleep in. The Academy believes that students work best under conditions of physical and mental hardship.'

So, Nyssa realised, all these luxurious surroundings were for the benefit of the staff.

They halted at the edge of the cliff path. The sun was almost straight ahead out to sea, painting it a beautiful, melancholy orange.

‘I can only apologise for the little misunderstanding earlier,’ he carried on fawningly, practically pawing at Nyssa’s grey robes.

‘Hmm?’ she muttered, increasing his obvious agony.

‘The threats, the argument. The fight. As you can understand, we are not used to seeing wom – ladies such as yourself holding such powers of responsibility.’

‘I get that a lot.’

‘Ahh...’

‘Everything will be reported in the audit.’

The Dean seemed unsure of how to take this statement. Precisely what Nyssa had intended. She wondered where these new instincts of hers to twist the knife had come from. Probably from a month of putting up with Morestran attitudes.

The Dean obviously fancied himself as a ladies’ man. He was in his forties but looked older. A thin waxed moustache revealed his vanity. Nyssa didn’t like him.

‘I hope my man did not injure your assistant permanently.’

Once again, the Dean was all smiles. ‘Oh no, no bother, none. I’m sure he will recover.’

‘My man Harwood is very good at his job.’

‘Indeed, Father Buller’s nose was a most... interesting shape. Ha ha ha.’ The Dean was sweating, his laughter too loud.

‘At least the matter resolved any lingering doubts concerning my credentials.’

‘Absolutely. No question.’

As Nyssa stared out to sea, she tried to imagine what the Doctor and Tegan might be up to.

‘Is there anything else?’ said the Dean. ‘Just ask.’

He had broken her chain of thought. She realised she was wasting her time thinking about her friends. There was nothing she could do for them except get on with the job the Doctor had asked her to perform. She realised she was missing him.

‘No,’ she said sadly. ‘Just let me see your Technical Data Library.’

The Dean bowed and ushered her to follow him back to the main building. On the far side of the campus, a small supply ship was descending, lowering itself on to the Academy platform. Its lights glowed brightly in the twilight and the metal shone red, reflecting the evening sun.

As the Dean walked with her, his gaze constantly flicking over her body Nyssa realised that this was probably going to be a long job.

To her surprise, however, she found what she was looking for almost instantly.

It helped that she had a good idea of the situation with the Tower and also exactly how paranoid this culture was. Her long journey had given her time to consider carefully how she was going to proceed.

She had come here to investigate the disappearance of Brother Robeson, the case Ferdinand had been working on six years ago. From what she already knew, Robeson had been an exemplary student who had hanged himself in his cell after a mysterious interview with the then Dean, now untraceable. A cursory inspection of the case had been arranged and Nyssa suspected that the Church authorities had pressurised Ferdinand into reaching a verdict of suicide. From what he had told her, he hadn't even been allowed to inspect the body.

If Robeson had been involved in something suspicious, it was unlikely that the Academy authorities would have kept his files just lying around and even less likely that they would allow her to look at them.

Instead, she tried lateral thinking. Assuming he had found out something he shouldn't, and it involved the Energy Tower, then the most logical thing to look at was not who he was but what he did. The Energy Tower was clearly of the utmost value to the Morestrans and she doubted whether they would discard anything that might have a bearing on its construction.

She ordered the Dean of the Academy to let her into the Technical Data Library. The Dean, despite his obsequious manner, was clearly furious at her arrival. Only the formidable presence of Harwood kept him under control. Nyssa found this with Harwood. People were frightened to death of him.

She was frightened to death of him.

After two hours in the library, Nyssa had found out a lot about the Morestran Energy Tower. She was amazed at its conception, its scale and its ambition. To think that the resources of the whole empire had been redirected into the building of this huge space structure. It was the product of genius, or madness, but undoubtedly grand folly.

Because that was what Brother Robeson had found out.
The Energy Tower wasn't going to work.

*SORENSEN ACADEMY MEMO – 01.10.92.
Department of Dimensional Mechanics.*

Brother Robeson to Fr Littell, Dean.

The Dimensional Mechanics concerning the Energy Tower are incorrect. There is a basic mathematical error in equation 73, believed solved nearly eight hundred years ago by this department.

The error is subtle but devastating. The constant integer y – believed to represent theoretical probability concerning dimensional power interfaces – has been calculated from the incorrect assumption that any multi-dimensional bore-holes exist in a flux state conforming to that of m , the integer representing dimensional stability in our own Morestran universe.

It seems hard to believe that this mistake could have occurred. Once accepted, however; the error would be very difficult to pinpoint. Indeed, it was only by accident that I chanced upon it myself.

The consequences of such a fundamental error in the Tower design are devastating. Put simply, the dimensional openings required to connect the Tower from Planet A to B will not stabilise to any safe and predictable degree, unless the new dimension is exactly like our own. I do not believe this to be the case, and the work of my colleagues would support this.

I have rechecked my calculations on many occasions and am certain that they are correct. I have collated my notes and intend to pass them on to Father Leadbeet, head of my department. I thought I ought to transmit this news to you beforehand.

SORENSEN ACADEMY MEMO – 02.10.92.

Dean of Academy Littell to Br Robeson.

Congratulations on your discovery. You have acted properly and well. I have put you forward for a special commendation. Who knows, you may have saved the Morestran Empire.

You did the right thing not to share your findings with anybody. For the present I would ask you to keep this matter to yourself. We will need to consider our options very carefully.

Please visit my office this afternoon. 1430 degrees. I look forward to hearing your opinions on this serious matter.

The Technical Data Library was suddenly a very threatening place.

Nyssa couldn't believe what she had found. She was trembling. The scraps of paper on which Brother Robeson had done his work were barely decipherable and incredibly complicated. Even she had had problems working it out. No wonder they hadn't been destroyed, there was probably nobody in the Academy who could understand the dimensional equations.

He had been correct, of course. It was a tiny error, easily made; an assumption that Traken itself had believed for over a century. However, Traken had not thrown all its resources into the building of an Energy Tower that could never work.

Nyssa realised all too well what would happen to her if anybody found out what she knew. What had happened to Robeson.

'Is there a problem?' came a voice from the doorway. Nyssa jumped. She tried to regain her composure.

'Nothing but the disturbance,' she replied haughtily.

It was the Dean. He was smiling again. 'Found anything interesting?'

She had to keep the edge out of her voice. 'Not yet.' Had she replied too quickly? Did he already know?

'I shall leave you to it then. I just wanted to ask whether you would join me for dinner in my quarters this evening. A private dinner.'

What? What was he saying? 'Look ...'

'Call it... professional courtesy.'

Nyssa wanted to knock that grin off his smug face. She wasn't prone to violent thoughts but this man...

'Just go away,' she snapped. 'I'm working.'

The grin disappeared. His eyes betrayed his fury. She realised she had overstepped the mark. 'I see. I see,' he said softly. 'That's the way it is to be, is it? Well, I just wanted you to know I have taken the liberty of sending a scribe back to Capital City, just a little precaution to confirm your credentials. After all, in this time of political unrest, it does seem a little odd for the Imperium to be investigating a religious institution. Still, I'm sure there's nothing to worry about, eh. Ciao!'

He bowed theatrically, turned and went.

Nyssa breathed again. But she couldn't stop her hands shaking.

On her walk back to her cell, her paranoia had increased when she realised someone was following her. It was lunchtime and students were trudging unenthusiastically towards the refectory. Their pale faces were pinched and downcast.

Nyssa pushed her way through their ordered lines and out into the grounds. It was a fine summer afternoon and the fresh air was a relief after the stuffy confines of the library. She felt as if the wind was blowing the dust from her, cleaning her off. That was when she had realised she was being followed.

Without looking round, her breathing heavy, she skipped off the pathway and into the bushes. She jogged on a few yards and waited.

A noise. Someone pushing their way through branches and leaves. Nyssa was very aware of Robeson's notes scrunched and hidden in her robes. If she was caught, there could be no denial. She started off again.

When she realised whoever was following her was beginning not to care if they made a noise or not, Nyssa knew she was going to have to deal with the situation. She was reaching the cliff path where she had stood with the Dean the previous evening.

She turned abruptly and the robed figure emerging from the bushes stopped. Her pursuer wore a hood and the face was in shadow.

Nyssa decided to try and brazen it out. She wasn't very good at this sort of thing, it was usually the Doctor's job. 'What do you want?'

The figure said nothing, just began walking towards her. Nyssa noticed her follower was wearing a grey habit, a uniform she hadn't seen before. 'Do you know who I am?' she snapped, trying to appear authoritative.

The figure stopped, still not making a sound. 'Don't come any closer,' Nyssa said, backing up to the cliff's edge. She hoped she wasn't going to have to try to run down its steep path.

The figure raised an arm and then Harwood appeared out of nowhere and grabbed it. The pursuer cried out and Harwood twisted round, arm locked about the neck. Nyssa caught a glint of steel and she realised what he was going to do. 'Wait!' she screamed and ran at him.

Harwood seemed irritated by her order. But he held back his knife. Nyssa reached them and lifted the hood.

The pursuer was a woman. Harwood's grip was crushing her throat. 'Come... come to warn you...' she choked.

'Harwood,' Nyssa snapped. The grip relaxed.

The woman was red-faced with pain, her long blonde hair pulled out of its tight knot. Nyssa guessed she was in her late thirties. She was coughing.

'Why have you been following me?'

The woman massaged her neck. 'Not... not safe back there. Couldn't talk.'

'Who are you?'

At last the woman seemed to recover herself. She had an inner strength, evinced by her angry glare at Harwood. It was refreshing to find a female who wasn't utterly subdued. 'We haven't much time. They watch everything. I'm Maran.'

'Are you a student?'

'Of course. That's why they let me out. Listen, you must be careful. The Dean has already signed for your execution.'

'How do you know?'

'I have friends.'

Harwood pointed the knife at her. 'Why should we trust you?' he asked.

Maran glanced contemptuously at the blade. 'Wait around. You'll find out soon enough. What are you doing here, anyway?'

Nyssa almost told her, then thought better of it. 'Who are you?'

Maran ignored the question. She was looking around, perhaps expecting eavesdroppers. 'We should go.'

‘Not yet,’ said Nyssa.

‘This isn’t the time. Tell me what you’re doing here.’

‘Who are you working for?’ asked Nyssa again.

‘This is getting us nowhere.’

‘I agree. Harwood, cut her throat.’

There was a pause. Nyssa waited for the information to sink in. Harwood snapped to attention as understanding came through. The blade flashed. Maran started to run but he caught her wrist. His arm bulged as he twisted it. He meant business. Maran began to shake.

‘Wait! Wait! Have you heard of the Cult of Science?’ Her voice was shrill, panicked.

‘I have heard its mention.’ Nyssa felt sorry for the woman but this did seem the only way to deal with Morestrans.

‘We’re trying to find out what’s going on at the Tower. I expect you are too. We’ve been watching you. That’s why you were sent here, wasn’t it? You know something.’

‘I’m asking the questions.’ Nyssa tried to remember how many times various captors had said this to her. ‘Harwood.’

‘Wait! Look, I don’t know much. Just that students here are being taken away somewhere. To something called the Zeta Project. Students who are vital to the work on the Energy Tower. We’re trying to find out where and why.’

‘Well, I might be able to help you with the why,’ said Nyssa. ‘But the where...’

‘Two more students have gone missing this week and there’s an unscheduled flight due here tomorrow at dawn. We think it’s going to take them to the Zeta Project. Some of us are planning to stow away on it.’

‘What’s that got to do with us?’ asked Harwood.

‘Well,’ Maran’s tone was withering, sarcastic; she was getting control of her panic. ‘We thought that as you were rifling through data in the Technical Library you might just be trying to find out the same thing. I thought we could come to an agreement. Now, for the Dark Gods’ sake, let me go or we’re all dead.’

Nyssa waved Harwood away. He slipped the blade back inside his tunic. Maran got up off her knees.

‘Unless you’ve got a better way of getting out of here, I suggest you come with us tomorrow. We rendezvous at two degrees before sun-up. In the loading area of the shuttle bay. Now, I’ve got to go.’

Harwood raised an arm as if to stop her but Nyssa shook her head. Maran flicked her hood back and hurried away. She was still shaking.

‘Curiouser and curiouser.’ said Nyssa softly. She felt ashamed at the way she had treated Maran. This wasn’t like her at all. She remembered the officer on the ship. What was this place doing to her? She ignored Harwood’s approving grin and went to get some food.

That evening she checked through Robeson’s calculations once more. There was no need – she already knew they were correct – but it gave her a hook, something to pin her conscious mind on while she thought.

Harwood had gone off to find out what he could about Maran’s story. Nyssa didn’t doubt that he was capable of looking after himself. He wasn’t a bad man and he looked after her. It was just this place: so cold, so savage, the veneer of civilisation very, very thin. Perhaps it was the result of keeping women so far at the back that they had no influence on the world.

Her more immediate problem was how to contact the Doctor. She hadn’t expected to discover the secret of the Energy Tower so quickly. If the Academy really was out to silence her, how could she get the information to him before they struck?

And what was this Zeta Project? The Doctor hadn’t known about that when she had left Capital City. Did he know about it now? What was certain was that she had found out the biggest secret in Morestran history. How many others knew? The Dean? Was that why he had invited her to dinner? She was going to have to be very careful.

Already Nyssa knew which way her thoughts were leading her. She was tired of being a Morestran official, tired of the petty bullying. It was too easy. She was getting too used to the thrill of sanctioned abuse, getting her own way through force.

She would go with the Scientists to this Zeta Project. And if it was a trap, so be it. She couldn’t really see any other way out of here.

The cell door opened, interrupting her thoughts. Harwood entered, as impassive as ever. He raised a finger to his lips. Nyssa frowned; what was he doing?

Harwood reached a large, calloused hand under the table at which Nyssa was sitting and pulled at something. The hand returned holding what looked like a black marble. Harwood crushed it in his palms.

‘A bug?’ Nyssa whispered. Harwood nodded. ‘What have you found out?’ she asked.

Harwood grunted. ‘Some of her story checks out. She’s a student all right. In Technological Systems. There is a ship landing early tomorrow morning and it doesn’t conform to any scheduled flights. And three men have been summoned here from the Capital. From the Church Service. They will arrive at twelve degrees tomorrow.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘That means us.’

So. It was all over. Well, they hadn’t really expected their cover to last. At least she had found the calculations. There was no choice now. Logic dictated their actions from this point on.

‘Harwood,’ said Nyssa slowly, trying to anticipate his objections, ‘I want you to get back to Capital City with this information.’ She indicated the sheets of Robeson’s scribbles.

He shook his head. ‘My orders are to protect you, Lady Nyssa. I’m doing that job just fine.’

She found herself wanting to understand this fierce, loyal man. ‘You’re very attached to Lord Ferdinand, aren’t you?’

He surprised her by blushing. His weather-beaten face with its almost two-dimensional jug ears glowed a delicate pink. He turned away. ‘He is my master. The Church took my sons. Both of them, just babies they were.’

‘Why?’

‘No reason. I was a peasant, in a village like any other. What could I do about it? My woman was dead, them boys were all I had.’

‘What did you do?’

Harwood’s face turned cruel, his jaw set and hard. ‘I went up the hill to the Church. I found the priest and I hung him from the spire with his robes.’

Nyssa nodded. She placed a hand on his arm. He shrugged it off. ‘I don’t need pity. Lord Ferdinand found me, put me to work. Work I do best.’

Nyssa picked up the notes. ‘You have to take these back.’

‘My orders...’

‘Look, for once I want you to think. These sheets of paper are the key to the whole Tower conspiracy. If you can get these to the Doctor, then you may be able to bring down the whole Church at one go. Can you get back without being caught?’

‘Of course I can.’

‘Will it be easier with or without me?’

‘Look...’

‘Answer me. Use logic. These papers have to go back. As soon as possible. With or without me?’

‘I...’

‘With or without me?’

Harwood leaned back and smiled. At last, Nyssa caught a glimpse of the man he must once have been. ‘All right, Lady Nyssa,’ he said, mock-wearily. ‘I’ll take your papers. I’ve got nothing to lose but my pension. When do you want me to go?’

‘Right away.’

‘And what are you going to do?’

Nyssa smiled back at him. ‘You know what I’m going to do.’

Following Harwood’s advice, Nyssa didn’t sleep in her cell that night. Instead, she bundled up a few belongings and followed him out into the grounds. The night was cloudy and the lawns and bushes were laced with shadow. Only a handful of lights blazed in the main building, none in the halls of residence.

They stole along the paths, Harwood leading the way. He led Nyssa to an old, battered shed that he said he had picked out the previous day. It was full of gardening tools.

It was here that she said goodbye to the man who had been her companion for three weeks. He was keen to go but appeared genuinely concerned for her safety.

‘Don’t worry,’ Nyssa whispered. ‘I’ll see you back at court. Just deliver the papers. Tell the Doctor and Tegan I’m missing them. And Harwood?’

He turned to her, clearly embarrassed by her emotion. ‘Hmm?’ he coughed.

Nyssa smiled warmly. ‘Thank you.’

He nodded before dashing away into the dark.

As soon as he had gone, Nyssa knew she was going to miss him. The shed was cold. She was frightened. She wasn't going to get much sleep.

The ship touched down at its allotted time. Nyssa watched it land. The first streaks of dawn were brightening the sky. The landing lights glowed. They seemed warm and inviting to her after a cold sleepless night.

She jogged towards what she assumed was the loading area: a crate-packed bay tucked beneath the circular landing pad. A hydraulic lift inside whined its way up to the stilled ship. Occasionally a technician would walk by carrying equipment but in general the whole place was quiet. It confirmed Nyssa's suspicions that this was a secret flight.

She reached the loading area and wondered whether she was about to be betrayed. All this on the word of some strange woman who just happened to have wandered up to her. Nyssa wondered whether she wanted to believe her story because she had a gentleness, a vulnerability she hadn't found elsewhere in this empire. She hoped this wouldn't be her undoing.

There was no one here. She positioned herself behind a crate and prepared herself for a long wait.

Then she saw them. Maran and a man, dressed as technicians, wandering towards the hydraulic lift. They were casual, carting some crates as if this was their job. A cap contained Maran's long, blonde hair.

For a moment, Nyssa lost her nerve. Perhaps this was a trap, some plan of the Dean's to humiliate her before a long and painful death. She hesitated.

Maran and the man reached the lift. The man thumped the red rubber button on the frame and the flat bay began to descend, singing noisily as it did so. Maran, for the first time, seemed uncomfortable. She turned and looked back out to the bay doors. She was biting her lip. The lift continued its slow journey down.

Nyssa made her decision. She raised a hand and waved at Maran. The woman saw her, looked around and motioned her over. Nyssa stood up and, taking the lead from Maran, walked slowly to the lift.

'I hope you're not setting me up,' she whispered to Maran.

'Funny,' came the reply, 'I was thinking the same thing.' She gestured to the man, slim and nervous. 'This is diCosta.'

The man nodded sharply. 'Come on, come on,' he hissed at the lift.

'You sure this is going to work?' asked Nyssa.

'No,' said Maran.

A technician wandered in from the outside doors. Nyssa suddenly became aware of the smell of grease and ionised hydron from the ship's fuel tanks. Maran gripped her arm.

The technician coughed, rubbed his eyes and wandered out again. He looked like he'd forgotten what he was here for.

'You know, this might actually work,' said Maran.

The lift hit the floor. DiCosta hurriedly tried to shove the cart on to it. The wheels got stuck and he shook it furiously. 'Damn!'

'All right, all right,' said Maran calmly. 'Take it easy. We'll do it together.'

The three of them hoisted the cart on to the bed of the lift. Nyssa's long noblewoman's dress was starting to get on her nerves. She wished she was wearing the sensible technician's outfit. She was going to be very noticeable up on that landing platform.

'This is the plan,' said diCosta once the lift was rising again. 'There'll be one or two guards up there but they shouldn't be expecting anything. We load the crates in, then get inside them. I've sawn off the screws on the lids so they should open easily. As long as they don't actually suspect anything they shouldn't bother checking what happened to three technicians.'

'Right,' said Nyssa. Hide in a crate and hope no one checks. That was their plan? Something cold began to swirl in her stomach.

The lift reached the landing pad and a chill wind hit them. The dark ship swelled out over their heads, its two hold panels swung open like jaws. A walkway led up to the lightless interior.

'Lovely morning,' came a voice behind them. All three stopped dead.

The Dean continued. 'You know, from this landing pad you can see right out to the islands. Most bracing.'

Nyssa turned round slowly to face him. He had that grin again. 'Of course, not so good if you're afraid of heights.' He bowed gently towards them. 'Lady Nyssa, Novice Maran, Brother diCosta.'

The Academy guards behind him drew their swords from their sheaths.

'We mustn't be taken alive,' hissed diCosta.

Wonderful, thought Nyssa.

The Dean snapped his fingers. Two guards on the edge of the pad began to haul a heavy canvas sack towards them. The wind was really picking up now and Nyssa had to wrap her arms around herself.

'Bumped into an old friend of yours,' said the Dean pleasantly. He snatched at the sack and hauled it open. Nyssa couldn't see much inside, just hair. And blood. A man, broken mouth moving, sucking in air. Harwood.

The Dean pulled the drawstrings tight, closing the sack again. 'Most helpful. A little shy but we got him chatting in the end.' They all watched as the guards dragged the sack back to the edge of the pad. The Dean produced some familiar-looking sheets of paper from his robes. 'Naughty, naughty,' he tutted. 'Stealing Academy property. We have strict rules about that sort of thing.'

'Let him go,' Nyssa found herself saying. She couldn't keep her eyes off the sack. 'I'm the one you want. He's nothing.'

'You're right about that,' said the Dean and nodded. The guards dropped the sack over the edge.

'NO!' Nyssa yelled and ran at the Dean. DiCosta suddenly darted to her right, pulling a revolver from his overalls.

Nyssa couldn't feel anything but hot rage boiling over in her mind. She would do anything to wipe that grin from the Dean's face. Something blasted behind her and a whine whipped through the air. The Dean ducked and Nyssa found herself trapped in the arms of three guards.

'Run, Maran, run!' yelled diCosta from somewhere. Nyssa heard gunshots, a volley of them, and someone falling. The guards were clutching at her face, her body, her hair. She felt faint and sick. Eventually someone slapped her face. Consciousness returned.

'Go on, then, kill me!' she yelled. The Dean hit her again.

The guards pulled her round so she could see diCosta lying face down on the tarmac, a pool of blood growing beneath him as if pumped from an underground spring. She saw Maran, similarly secured by guards, her cap flying off in a furious struggle.

'I'm not going to kill you,' said the Dean smoothly. 'That would be a waste.'

'What are you going to do, then?'

The Dean paused as the twisting Maran was brought over to him. 'I'm going to grant your wishes.'

'What are you talking about?' hissed Maran.

'I'm giving you the chance to fulfil your mission. You're going to Zeta Major.'

Chapter Ten

Hippolito blinked in the morning light. He tried to think of the last time he had allowed himself the luxury of leaving the palace and doing something as pleasurable as watching the sun rise. Sometimes, especially after visits to his father, he contemplated a simpler life, a more pastoral one perhaps. Simple pleasures, simple conflicts. Getting enough food to live, finding water, raising a family. Was that what he wanted? He thought about the complex dynamics of running the court, the covert struggles, the deal making. Did he want to give that up? No. Not really. This was his life, what made him, and he loved it. Powerful or powerless, anybody could watch a sun come up.

Antonio was staring enviously at the stealth ship. It hissed and steamed as the morning dew vaporised off its black hull. Antonio liked technology. Correction, he liked powerful technology. Hippolito realised his brother would have been more than happy with another life. Space pilot maybe, or soldier.

'Nearly time,' said Antonio.

Hippolito nodded. He stretched, allowing the morning air to permeate his muscles. One thing about the collapse of the industrial, the planet had been given a chance to clean itself, to cough up the detritus of pollution. He thought about the Energy Tower and how different Alpha Major would be in a year's time.

An imperial coach came clattering across the potholes and concrete of the old airport. Hippolito watched as it passed the huge, rusting passenger jets, dwarfed by the old machines. He would enjoy seeing them taking off again, filling the sky with business and energy. In the distance, the half-ruined control tower stabbed upwards, ripped open, displaying its metal innards. He had had enough of decay. He wanted to build.

Hippolito clicked his fingers and the squad of marines jumped down from their horse-drawn carrier. They shouldered their equipment packs.

The coach finally reached the stealth ship and Hippolito realised he had sweaty palms. This could be a momentous day in the history of his empire but it was not without its risks. He didn't like situations in which he wasn't fully in control.

The driver pulled up, his face swathed in woollen scarves. Hippolito saw Antonio fingering the gun inside his tunic. He shook his head to draw his attention to the action. Antonio stopped.

The door swung open and the Doctor emerged. Tegan followed.

'Where's Ferdinand?' asked Antonio, watching the girl as she stepped down. He was incorrigible.

'I don't know,' replied the Doctor. He was eyeing the stealth ship appreciatively.

Hippolito felt a needle of suspicion in his mind. This wasn't part of the plan.

'He wasn't there this morning,' said Tegan. 'We waited but he didn't turn up. Maybe he didn't want to go to the Tower.'

'Really,' said Hippolito.

'Shall we get moving?' enquired the Doctor. 'There's much to do.' He seemed in good spirits. A lot healthier than Hippolito had seen him before. He decided he really didn't like this man.

Hippolito nodded up to the ship's hatch. It opened with a smooth hum and an electronically operated ladder hissed down to the tarmac. He noticed the Doctor was looking at him, an expression of – what was it? – something like knowing disapproval. Tegan was restless; she kept shuffling her feet. Hippolito felt that she found her opulent dress and bonnet uncomfortable. Indeed, she certainly didn't look like a Morestran noble in them. She had too much energy.

Game time.

The coach driver unbuckled some rucksacks from the roof of the coach and threw them down to the Doctor and Tegan. The marines stood ready.

'Just one thing before we go, Doctor,' said Hippolito.

'Hmm?'

Hippolito didn't like this casual flippancy. The Doctor seemed bored, distracted, as if he already knew what was about to happen.

'My brother and I watched a videotape the other day.'

'Really?'

'Yes really. And apart from discovering some interesting truths concerning the roles of Commander Salamar and Vishinsky, you were the star turn.'

'I see.'

'You could have made an attempt to look like the Doctor.'

'It was rather careless of me. The curly hair, the nose –'

'Shut up.' Hippolito was beginning to get very annoyed with this impostor.

'Hippolito! Listen, he changed. He can change his –' Tegan was silenced as the guards grabbed her.

'Tegan, please.' The Doctor was gentle but firm. 'Lord Hippolito thinks he knows what he's doing.'

Hippolito took a stride to the Doctor and knocked him over. Tegan yelped. Before she could move, marines were pulling her away.

'You liar!' bellowed Hippolito.

The Doctor put a finger to his lip, checking for blood. His calmness infuriated Hippolito further. He barely noticed Antonio unclipping his pistol.

'How dare you walk into my offices and claim to be him? You think you can make an idiot out of me?'

'It's not me you have to worry about,' the Doctor replied. 'Anyway, if you want my true opinion, you didn't need me to make you an idiot.'

Hippolito lost his temper. White fury clouded over his conscious mind. He wrestled the revolver from his brother. He pointed it with shaking hands at the Doctor's head. 'That's the last time you get smart with anyone. I should have done this the first time I set eyes on you.'

The Doctor lay on the tarmac, staring at him. There was no anger or fear in his face, just pity. Hippolito began to pull the trigger.

'No,' said the deep voice from the ladder. Hippolito was grinding his teeth but something, some steel in the voice, kept him from firing. And all the time the Doctor, or whoever he really was, kept staring at him. Staring. His finger locked on the trigger.

'Doctor,' said Tegan. 'It's him. The man who –'

'I know,' the Doctor replied steadily, not removing his gaze from Hippolito.

'You fool,' Hippolito hissed. 'You knew and you still came.'

He felt a hand on his arm and someone pushed him aside. Hippolito watched as the newcomer helped the Doctor to his feet. They looked at each other, neither blinking.

‘We meet at last,’ said Kristyan Fall.

Ever since the Doctor had explained his plan to her, she had a feeling they were doomed. Now, as she tried to free herself from the guards, she was certain.

Hippolito wanted to blow his head off. No doubt about that.

She remembered his words earlier that morning. He had shaken her awake and called her into the garden with Ferdinand. The nightbirds were singing away, winding up a headache. Ferdinand was bleary, rubbing his eyes.

It was funny how used she had got to this palace, being waited on hand and foot. She felt like she had been in the sweetshop too long. She was glad to be going.

‘This meeting. It’s a trap,’ the Doctor said simply.

Tegan and Ferdinand exchanged puzzled glances. ‘How do you know?’ she asked.

‘Call it an educated guess. The way the brothers acted in that meeting. They knew something, they were different. Believe me, I’m greatly experienced with traps.’

‘What could they know? You’ve told the truth, haven’t you?’ asked Ferdinand.

‘I’m not sure what they know but I’m worried.’

Tegan realised what had to be done. ‘We have to get out of here, right?’

The Doctor shook his head.

‘But you just said it was a trap.’

He put his arm round Tegan, in that way she often felt bordered on the condescending. ‘It doesn’t matter. I have to go back to the Energy Tower, whoever takes me. This is our only chance.’

‘But they’ll kill you if they need to.’

‘That’s right. Which is why there’s something I want you both to do for me. No arguments now. Listen carefully...’

And then he’d explained the plan that Tegan knew was doomed.

‘What about the girl?’ asked Antonio.

Tegan became uncomfortably aware that all eyes were on her. The handsome man she remembered from their dinner smiled. ‘Hello again.’

This time, she found him anything but charming. 'Go to hell,' she hissed.

'Been there,' he replied. 'It wasn't much.'

She struggled again with her captors. She wanted to give him something to remind him of her.

'Tegan. Please,' said the Doctor.

Kristyan Fall turned back to him. 'She means something to you?'

'What do you think?'

'You expected a betrayal, didn't you?'

'I thought it was time we met. You can't take anti-matter from Zeta Minor. Not for much longer.'

'Says who? A madman calling himself the Doctor?'

'It's a fact. And you know I'm the Doctor.'

Kristyan Fall laughed. Tegan saw that the brothers looked confused. They certainly weren't appreciating being left out of the conversation. She decided it was time to sow a few seeds of dissent. 'Hippolito,' she shouted, 'this man ordered me to kill you. You trust him?'

Hippolito looked at his gun. For a moment, she saw the indecision in his face. Fall seemed completely unworried. Tegan thought this was winding the brothers up.

'Get this man on board,' Fall ordered.

'And the girl?' asked Antonio.

'Kill her. As you should have done when you first saw her.'

Tegan stared pleadingly at the Doctor. This was going too far. He shook his head sharply, imperceptibly. Her instincts were screaming at her to try and make a break for it. She forced herself to calm down. She had to trust him. They wouldn't have lived so long in the TARDIS if she didn't.

Hippolito looked up from his contemplation. 'All right,' he said and raised the gun to Tegan. 'But we take the man.'

Fall looked at him, as if the son of the emperor was an errant child. 'Don't try and play games, Hippolito. It's too late for that.'

'There's something you're not telling us, Fall,' said Antonio.

Tegan noticed Fall wince at being addressed in this way. He couldn't hide the contempt in his sheer blue eyes. 'The man,' Hippolito continued. 'Remember, these are my guards.'

'We're wasting time,' Fall was confident, arrogant even. Tegan noticed that the Doctor was looking into the sky, as if

waiting for this childish argument to resolve itself. One day, he would trip himself up. Just as long as it wasn't today.

'I want him. And you. Back at the palace.'

'I don't care what you want,' Fall stated. 'Just get this man on board ship.'

'No,' Hippolito said firmly. His brother, behind him, backed away, fingers brushing against the side of the ship. The marines were edgy, unshouldering their weapons, bringing them to bear on Fall and the Doctor. 'I'm changing the agreement.'

'That's a certainty,' said Ferdinand, raising his rifle. He pulled the driver's scarf from his face.

'Quite a party,' said Fall drily. 'You're the little man who's been causing me so much trouble.'

Ferdinand didn't react. He pointed his rifle at Hippolito. 'I don't like parties. Or witty comments. Let Tegan go. Now! And believe me, I will kill you.'

Hippolito dropped his weapon. He nodded at Tegan. She felt the pressure on her arms release.

'Get into the coach, Tegan,' said the Doctor.

'I'm not leaving you.'

'You have to.'

'How touching,' said Kristyan Fall. 'I must say, you have excellent taste in companions, Doctor. The lady is charming.'

'Tegan. The coach.'

Reluctantly, very reluctantly, she did what she was told. 'What about you?' she asked, not wanting them to be split up yet again.

'I told you. I have to go.'

Something in his voice reassured her. She clambered back inside the carriage, aware that everybody was watching her, wanting her dead. She slammed the door and hurriedly pulled the curtain aside to keep her eye on the Doctor.

It was Antonio who made the mistake that broke the tension. Tegan saw it out of the corner of her eye. Typical really, he had spent most of the time she had known him either preening himself or leering at her. He obviously fancied himself as Action Man. He had made his way along the side of the stealth ship to a rucksack awaiting stowage. He lowered his hands into the bag and produced a second revolver. He whipped up to shoot.

'No!' shrieked Tegan.

Ferdinand fired just as the Doctor ducked. Hippolito's head jerked back. He crashed to the floor. Antonio gaped openmouthed, his weapon cold and quiet in his hand.

Tegan couldn't see Ferdinand's reaction but she could guess how shocked he must feel. Fall stared at Hippolito's body. 'Pretty poor plan, Doctor,' he said. 'If you knew this was a trap. Is this the best you can do?'

The Doctor showed one of his rare moments of anger. 'This wasn't my plan.'

Tegan heard a loud bang. Something in the sky was approaching with a whistle.

Fall looked up.

'This is my plan,' said the Doctor and dived to the ground.

The cannonball smashed into the mass of marines crowded round the ship. The impact threw them apart in an explosion of gunpowder and concrete. The crimp of the blast flattened Tegan's eardrums.

Suddenly, the air was full of smoke and hoofbeats. A ring of Church cavalry was racing towards the stealth ship, curved sabres raised.

The remaining marines picked themselves up. They were dazed by the blast. The chatter of weapons started up; the whistle and whine of bullets singing through the smoky air.

'Take off! Take off!' Fall was bellowing. Another explosion rocked the runway. Tegan felt the coach start to move, as Ferdinand cracked the whip to get the witless horses moving. She fell backwards into her seat as bullets rammmed into the door. The coach turned, gaining speed.

'Doctor! Doctor!' Tegan leaned out of the bouncing window to spot him. The air was filled with smoke and flame. Concrete chipped and powdered as bullets rained into the area. She couldn't see the Doctor anywhere.

Within seconds they were racing away. 'Ferdinand! Stop!' she shrieked, trying to clear the thunder of the explosion from her ears. They crashed through the ring of Church militia dashing towards the smoke-wreathed stealth ship.

As she watched, lights lit up round the black hull. She felt something like an earthquake and then it lifted from the ground, firing out a halo of smoke into the advancing troops. It twisted nimbly, then disappeared up into the sky.

His brother lay dead on the old airport runway. Shot by the traitor Ferdinand.

Antonio climbed through the wreckage and smoke left by the battle. He listened to the shots and clashing steel behind him; the Church finishing off the last of the marines.

He slipped climbing crumbling concrete and felt someone following him. He used the slide to his advantage and rolled round, loosing his revolver into his armoured pursuer. The Church Guard dropped, hands clutching his face.

Despite his infamous temper, Antonio congratulated himself on his cool thinking. The fury would come later. Survival was the key at this present moment. Back to the palace and safety.

An hour later, he had avoided the cavalry patrols and had reached the airport perimeter. As he climbed through the rusting barbed wire, the thought came to him that he was now the sole head of the Morestran Empire.

Well, he knew what he was going to do. He had had enough of his brother's wheeling and dealing. For all his cunning he had ended up shot down by a traitor, a traitor Hippolito should have dealt with after the first assassination attempt. Antonio realised he didn't feel much loss at his brother's death. It was a dangerous world.

As he worked out his route to the Imperial Palace, only one idea was forming in Antonio's mind.

Revenge.

The Church was going to pay for this.

Transcript: The Grand Council of the Morestran Orthodox Church. The most holy planet of Archetryx.

Presiding: His Holiness, Papal Majesty Luciani XVII.

Members present: Systems Arch-Cardinals Alexander (A), Czieszko (C), Morelli (M) and Doughtonville (D).

Meeting convened this year of grace 20.02.99.

TRANSCRIPT READS:

His Holiness: I want to talk about Kristyan Fall.

C: I thought he was dead.

His Holiness: Apparently, once again reports of his death are greatly exaggerated. It seems our man on Alpha was wasting our time. I've taken steps to improve his accuracy.

A: Just what is going on with this Kristyan Fall crap?

His Holiness: That is precisely why I've called you here at such short notice. It appears that Kristyan Fall has decided to go out on his own.

D: The mother! After all we did for him.

A: What's he done?

His Holiness: Just whacked Hippolito, that's all.

M: Holy [deleted]!

C: What's he want?

His Holiness: We think he might want to keep the Tower for himself when it opens for business.

M: He's mad! He'd never hold it against us.

D: Or the families.

His Holiness: We know. So must he. He must have some sort of plan.

D: What are we going do?

His Holiness: There's only one thing we can do. Get the Zeta Project back. I'm planning to move our entire operation to the Energy Tower by the end of the week. Take the Tower and we can keep Fall out.

M: What do you mean, move?

His Holiness: Exactly what I said. We abandon Archetryx and make our new home on the Tower. You system governors will provide support while we move.

A: My God!

His Holiness: Don't blaspheme! I'm the [deleted] Pope!

A: Sorry. So, what do you want us to do?

His Holiness: Nothing. Just be ready. If there is a war I want you mobilised.

D: No problem. They want a war, we'll give 'em war.

M: What about the money? Wars cost money.

A: When the Tower goes on-line there won't be no need for money.

His Holiness: Right. Who owns the Tower owns the empire. This is the way we planned it from the start. I'm just changing the schedule.

C: I just never thought the damn thing would work.

His Holiness: It didn't. That's why we started the Zeta Project. Now, will you can the talk and get moving?

All: Yes, Your Holiness.

EXTRACT ENDS.

The stealth ship screamed up into space. The G-force was incredible, the anti-grav trying to kick in, unable to cope with the almost vertical ascent. He was pushed deep into the leather seat, a force like some invisible hand pressing him back. He felt his teeth rattle as the ship boosted power to achieve escape velocity.

At last, the pressure eased. The stealth ship seemed to right itself as it punched out of the stratosphere of Alpha Major into the clean depths of space.

The Doctor reacted quickly. He made a move for the hatch.

A gun appeared in his face, lightning fast. Kristyan Fall. It appeared that Ferdinand's dossier had been accurate.

'No, no, no, Doctor,' said Fall calmly. 'No tricks.'

The Zero Man seemed unruffled by their sudden ascent, only the untidy comma of black hair falling over his forehead betraying any dishevelment. Fall brushed it back with his free hand. 'Don't worry, we rendezvous with the bulk ship in two hours. Then it's straight to the Tower. Have you had breakfast?'

The Doctor, trying to relax, sat back in his seat. 'Do you know, I'm not really hungry.'

'That was a neat trick, alerting the Church. Did you know they want me to go back with them and explain my appalling behaviour?'

'As a matter of fact, no. I did it to save Tegan from meeting you again.'

'How nice. What a kind man you are. What about you, though? You said you had to come. Why?'

'It was my only chance to stop your Zeta Project.'

'The Zeta Project will save the Morestran Empire from ruin. Why would anyone want to stop it?'

The Doctor sighed. He'd had enough of this. 'You've seen the original mission tapes. You know why.'

Kristyan Fall nodded slowly. He seemed amused by the Doctor. 'A fascinating adventure, Doctor. I admired your performance immensely.'

'Especially my shape-changing abilities?'

'Unlike my rather stupid imperial brothers, the concept of a man who can alter his appearance does not strike me as farfetched. After all, if you can travel through time and space in a blue box...'

'Why didn't you kill me?' said the Doctor.

Fall reholstered his pistol, and paused. The Doctor caught a glimpse of the real Kristyan Fall, just for a second. There was an animal in him, something ruthless, predatory. Then the light was back in his eyes and he was all smiles.

'We have a challenging situation on *Torre del Oro*.'

'With anti-matter.'

'With anti-matter. Come with me.'

Fall opened the hatch to the bridge. The Doctor followed, remembering the layout from his previous journey. This was the same ship but he noticed the crew was different. He thought about Captain Vishin. He didn't want to know what Fall had done with him. This crew was older and looked dangerous. The Doctor presumed they were members of this 'Church Service' Ferdinand had told him about.

Fall led him to a terminal linked up to a holographic display unit. The operator tapped out a code sequence and a tiny holographic model of the Energy Tower blinked on to the little grey mat that contained the HDI projectors. The VR model rotated gently in space.

Another tap and the holograph zoomed into the side of the Tower. It moved through the hull and into a maze of corridors that the Doctor remembered well. At last, the zooming ceased and they were looking at the anti-matter chamber. The holographic camera panned round the bulging crates.

'As you can see,' said Fall, 'we have almost reached critical mass. However, watch. Increase HDI time ratio, four degrees.'

The op obeyed and suddenly the pan round the room increased speed. It focused in on one of the open crates which started to glow. The glow increased steadily.

'Premature activation,' said the Doctor. 'Of course. Out of its stable environment, the anti-matter will become uncomfortable and its anti-atoms start to vibrate, causing a sudden energy release. Why are you using it at all? What's wrong with your original plan with the Tower? You know how dangerous that substance is. Watch your videotape again. Watch it carefully. A whole crew was destroyed for a few tins of anti-matter. Is it worth it?'

Fall sneered. 'You sound like those fools at the Church. Antimatter isn't alive, Doctor.'

'Are you sure?'

‘But you have hit the target. Stability, or rather a lack of it, that’s our problem. You see, in their inert state the crystals are quite harmless...’

‘You’re wrong, Fall.’

‘But once this process begins, well, at the moment we’re having trouble containing their more colourful tendencies.’

‘Such as turning men into monsters. A rate that is increasing steadily, I should imagine.’

‘Correct. Which is of course why you are still alive.’

The Doctor bunched his fists in frustration. He tried to keep himself calm. ‘You have to understand, all of you, I don’t know how your Zeta Project gets the anti-matter into this universe, but believe me when I say it won’t work much longer. The only possible option is to return all the anti-matter to its rightful place. Now. There is no solution to this problem.’

Once again, the glint disappeared from Fall’s eye. The animal was back. ‘I don’t believe in problems, Doctor. Only challenges.’

Ferdinand and Tegan were stopped by the outer ring of artillery moving in on the old airport. From there they were taken to the Cathedral of High Spires in the *Barri Gotiq* of Capital City. This massive structure, all golden spires, was a haven for the Church diplomatic staff, who had moved there as soon as war became inevitable.

Inside the cathedral, with its labyrinthine tunnels and vaults, they were taken to see Arch-Cardinal Constantine. Ferdinand had had dealings with this corpulent, paranoid oaf before and did not go into the meeting with high hopes for their safety.

Now he had had time to think about what he had done, he found he had few regrets. He had given the brothers everything and they had still betrayed him. Would he have killed Hippolito if he had to do it again?

He knew before he asked himself the question the answer was yes. It seemed his unquenchable thirst for revenge had extended its range.

His actions kept turning over and over in his mind. He saw Antonio raise the gun, saw Hippolito move, felt his finger pull the trigger. He had assassinated the second son of the empire. And it wasn’t enough.

More important now was to find new allies. With the Doctor gone he needed something new to bargain with. He only hoped the Arch-Cardinal was in the mood to listen.

‘So,’ said the Arch-Cardinal, ‘Lord Hippolito is dead.’

Ferdinand realised that Tegan was trying to catch his eye. He shook his head faintly. They were sitting around an ancient conference table. The wooden hieroglyphs carved into its sides were so old Ferdinand couldn’t guess what they meant.

‘And you killed him?’ asked the old, beady-eyed Cardinal next to him.

‘I did,’ Ferdinand replied quickly. ‘And if you want to stop what he was planning you must give Tegan and me what we want.’

‘Which is?’

‘Full access to the Zeta Project.’

The Arch-Cardinal let out a belch of disbelieving laughter. His cheeks wobbled as the laugh became coughs. ‘You arrogant puppy. I don’t think you realise how soon your execution is due. You plunge our Church into war and you want me to help you?’

‘You need us,’ said Tegan.

It was odd, but Ferdinand was always forgetting how intelligent she was. For a woman. He tried not to think about how glad he had been when the Doctor had insisted on them staying together.

The Arch-Cardinal didn’t even look at her. ‘I’ve had enough of your lies. Get out of my sight.’ He dabbed at the saliva that had spilled from his lips.

‘Don’t you understand?’ Tegan suddenly boiled over. ‘You’re finished, all of you! Fall’s taken your precious Tower away and the best you can do is sit here and threaten us. Think, you idiot.’

Before the Arch-Cardinal had a heart attack, Ferdinand interrupted his volatile friend. ‘Fall made a deal with the brothers to have the Doctor turned over to them – that’s what the Doctor thought. Fall wants the Doctor to help him get the anti-matter on the Tower active. Once he does that you’ll never be able to get to him.’

‘Besides,’ added Tegan, trying to keep herself under control, ‘he risked his life to try and delay Fall. So you’d be able to get to the Tower first. I think you could be a little more grateful.’

The Arch-Cardinal looked like he hadn’t understood a word. The older Cardinal coughed diplomatically. ‘Arch-

Cardinal...' He spoke quietly. He had a voice like greased rope.

'Mantrus, do you believe this rubbish?' The Arch-Cardinal scraped his chair away, clearly after an exit.

Patiently, but with iron in his voice, Mantrus continued. 'Arch-Cardinal, let us not act in haste. Remember, by now it will be common knowledge that the Zero Man still lives. And the Doctor did contact us with his report. I feel it may be our final opportunity to regain favour with our colleagues on Archetryx.'

'But... but...'

'What harm would it do? And you never know. There might yet be an opportunity to find advantage in the situation.'

The Arch-Cardinal blustered and puffed for a few minutes but Ferdinand knew the wily old bird had won him over. 'I – I don't know. Why should we –'

'Perhaps if I were to oversee their efforts personally,' said Mantrus, 'we would have a first-hand insight into whatever they discover. After all, we weren't exactly briefed on the Zeta Project. They may discover something of value to us.'

In the end, Ferdinand wasn't sure whether the Arch-Cardinal acceded to Mantrus's argument or whether he was simply bored of the whole thing. Anyway, much to his and Tegan's relief, they got what they wanted. The Arch-Cardinal nodded, then clumped out of the room.

Ferdinand turned to give Tegan a reassuring smile when his gaze was intercepted by Cardinal Mantrus. He raised a wizened finger at Ferdinand. 'I know you of old, Ferdinand du Vindice. I know what you like to do to Church men. Let me tell you now, both of you, that your execution is merely postponed, not forgotten. Bring me results and quickly –' now he pointed at Tegan – 'or I'll have her killed.' The finger returned, 'And then you.'

Ferdinand stopped smiling.

EXTRACT: OFFICIAL COURT TRANSCRIPT – 22.02.99
NCC.

I, Scribe Thorenson, declare that this document contains a full and frank testimonial of the day's business of the IMPERIAL COURT OF MORESTRA.

Proclamation to be delivered by His Worship, the Chamberlain.

Extract time: 12:00.

CHAMBERLAIN: The court will rise for the presence of Lord Antonio, Emperor regent. Scribe will note the absence of all representatives of the Holy Morestran Church at this session.

LORD ANTONIO: By now you will all know of the death of the second son of the empire, my brother, Lord Hippolito, murdered yesterday morning by a traitor under the aegis of the Church. This traitor's name is Ferdinand du Vindice. Let this name rot behind the Gate for all eternity.

This is not the first time such an outrage has been visited upon this court. Well, I say: No more! No more. So in your name, in the name of the whole empire, I swear I will bring a vengeance on the Church that will live in the minds of those who survive it for centuries. I will bring down hell itself to rid this empire of their plague!

Go to your ships, marshal your armies, prepare for war. This is the time of blood. This is the Time of Vengeance!

TRANSCRIPT ENDS.

Zeta Major

Chapter Eleven

From the memoirs of General Plantanes, High Knight of the Order of Paladins.

Date of Entry: 23.02.99 NCC.

I strap my sword to my side. It seems heavier than I remember. Outside in the great ice fields of Ausbach, our giant troop carriers are blasting out snow as they activate their ground engines. My paladins are already boarded, eager for battle.

If only I could share their enthusiasm.

Despite the inevitability of war and my chosen role in it, I have prayed the call to arms would never come. My senior officers, all young and untried, strain to prove themselves. Not surprising really: a paladin's training is harsh and demanding, requiring spiritual as well as physical excellence. Decades spent honing mind and body for battles I thought would never appear. Now they have a chance to prove their worth, well, no wonder they can barely contain themselves.

I should have known better. I am responsible for the Order of Paladins, I have overseen the training of these men. The responsibility is mine.

If only I had taught them better the lessons of the last war, the one we confidently knew would be our last. I remember my pride, white armour gleaming, the golden tower emblazoned on my shield, the confident faces of my companions. We were the elite.

I recall the first echoing clangs as grapples fastened on to starships, the breathless excitement of boarding, the rush for the fight. The sounds and smells of ringing steel opening bodies.

Until men I trained with my whole life were carried away screaming for death.

No one remembers how sickening mass conflict has to be. And worse still, the aftermath. All the usual consequences: poverty, disease, exhaustion. My armour red with dried blood. The casual cruelty visited upon innocents in the name of Torre del Oro. The decades before anything approaching civilisation or stability came back.

Sometimes I wonder whether this is all some plan of the Dark Gods, if they watch from beyond the pointless skirmishes of mortals, waiting in the confident knowledge that without their help Morestrans move forward to the day when our extermination of ourselves will be complete; a time when they come through and rule the ashes.

I take one last look out at the ice fields. Their purity has sustained me through the years of peace, the infinite whiteness helping to blank my mind of the events of those terrible days. Now, like stains, the devastating roar of the troop carriers rocks and melts that landscape, scarring it for ever. I feel nothing but resignation.

Outside, the engines hammered into phase. The General heard the ice crack beneath their power. The castle shook. One of his aides, Major Petrov, entered his room. 'General, we are ready to leave.' His voice trembled with anticipation.

The General blotted and closed his journal. He laid his quill pen over its leather cover.

'General?' asked Petrov.

'All right, Petrov,' he replied wearily. 'We go to the Omega System.'

Admiral Oporto and Captain Torrance transferred themselves via shuttle to the largest of the imperial destroyers, the *Marne*. Its patched hull hinted at the desperate repairs within, completed in record time. Now it hung heavy in space, swarms of engineers administering last-minute surgery, ensuring its survival on the long journey to the Tower. The second warship, the *Sorenson*, was due in space within hours. It would have to be enough; the other craft on Minor were beyond resurrection.

'How many more?' asked Oporto as he reached the operations centre.

His crew, back in the old Space Service uniforms, saluted crisply. The Admiral took his place at the head of the conference table. Aides supplied him with fistfuls of data.

'Four troop carriers from Alpha...two destroyers from Gamma... another six from the outlying systems within a week.'

The Admiral tugged at the faded white tubing on his tunic. 'Not enough.'

‘Lord Antonio has promised the royal yacht and three of his light cruisers. Armaments are being fitted at this moment.’

Oporto leaned back in his swivel chair. ‘I want full complements of marines on each ship. And where are those energy weapons we were promised?’

‘Problems with energy decay in their battery units. We have some on board; technicians are collecting viable power units. There will be enough for two detachments, no more.’

The Admiral nodded. He looked at the nervous faces around him. ‘The Church will already be at the Tower. Our job will be to smash their blockade. The battle will be fought hand to hand. Prepare the fleet.’

The Morestran Empire was coming to life. Already Antonio’s pronouncement had filtered through to the outlying planets. Skirmishes started up as the governing bodies began clearing out opposing factions.

On Theta Major, a division of imperial troops attacked and destroyed a Church monastery. The planetary representative, asleep in his bed and entirely unprepared, was dragged out into the city streets and shot, along with his administrative staff. The monastery was burned to the ground.

On Eta, a single-planet system ruled by the Church, fleeing imperial representatives were destroyed by missile fire as they tried to achieve orbit in their diplomatic escape ship. The burning fragments landed in the midst of a crowd of cheering acolytes.

Most notable of these minor clashes occurred on Delta Minor, where an entire Church capital city was reduced to a hole in the ground by an imperial suicide mission detonating an antique hydrogen bomb in the cathedral vaults.

From all of the planets in the Inner Systems, the word had gone out to Church and Imperium alike: mobilise your spacecraft, prepare your soldiers. Get into space and set course for the Energy Tower.

Refitted and rearmed, the last remnants of two mighty space armadas blasted away from their systems, ancient flags displaying loyalties millennia old. Soldiers, engineers, crew all crammed inside their shells, aware that their old lives were over. They were now part of the process of history.

Who takes the Tower owns the Empire. *Torre del Oro*. Where the Morestrans would fight their last and greatest battle.

Their ship dropped out of warp and entered the Omega system. They saw the Church fleet immediately.

Two vast Church destroyers circled the thin white cylinder like sharks preparing for a kill. Kristyan Fall looked away from the sensor screen.

From a speaker: the shrill of an incoming transmission. A hard voice stated, 'This is the cruiser *Castillio*. Surrender your vessel. Do not attempt to fire on us or escape capture. We will shoot you down. There will be no further warnings.'

For a man about to find himself with a lot of explaining to do, the Doctor thought that Fall seemed surprisingly calm. 'More challenges?' he asked unassumingly.

'Not really. They're just early. I had hoped we would be on the Tower when they arrived. They're not as stupid as I thought they were.'

'Underestimation of opponents is a standard trait in megalomania.'

'Is that so?' Fall turned to the stoic ship's captain. 'Move in close and prepare for boarding.' The officer nodded.

It had been a frustrating trip for the Doctor. He had been impressed by the way the stealth ship had manoeuvred itself into the hold of the cargo transport and been piggybacked through hyper-space to reach this solar system. Not only did the stealth ship conserve fuel and energy, but it was also a perfect camouflage. Kristyan Fall was extremely resourceful in his planning.

Most frustrating, however, had been Fall's refusal to dispense any more information about what he wanted him to do. He had hardly seen the agent, spending most of the week confined to a tiny black cell on the stealth ship. All that he had achieved was worrying himself silly about what had happened to Tegan and Nyssa.

He told himself that Nyssa was probably enjoying a holiday rummaging through files at the Sorenson Academy and Tegan was hiding out on a sunny coast somewhere under the protection of Ferdinand. He kept telling himself this, but funnily enough he didn't believe a word of it.

Disturbingly, the visions were coming back. Slowly at first but now more and more frequently, each time with greater intensity. He wondered whether it had anything to do with proximity to the Energy Tower and the anti-matter stored within it.

Trying to use his time more effectively, and to keep his mind clear of the visions, he decided to concentrate on how he was going to get the anti-matter off the Tower and back to Zeta Minor. His only alternative at the moment was a very unpalatable one. He would have to somehow get all the anti-matter on the Tower, whatever state it was in, on board the TARDIS and pilot it back. Right. That was all.

The key lay in how Fall had managed to remove the crystals from the planet. He recalled his own visit to Zeta Minor, so long ago. The whole reason Sorenson and nearly all the others had been killed was precisely because they couldn't remove them. The planet had simply not allowed them to leave. In some way Fall must have compensated for the removal. And the only compensation could be more anti-matter. Which begged the question, if they were bringing anti-matter to Zeta Minor, why did they need to get the same stuff from the planet anyway?

So how had Fall done it? He only had one clue. The Zeta Project. Until he found out what that was he had very little room in which to work.

It was frustrating to think that Nyssa might well have found the answer, but they had left before she could let him know.

No matter how he tried, the Doctor knew he simply lacked the final clues that would provide him with the real answer to the problem. And unlike Fall, the Doctor believed in problems.

As the stealth ship approached the Castillio, the Doctor was taken to the bridge. It was here that he got his first good look at the Energy Tower, a thin needle against the backdrop of stars. He had to admit that the construction was impressive. It must have been over a hundred miles high, the needle tapering to a point surrounded by a ring of spherical dimensional boosters. Well, he thought to himself, it could work. It could just do that.

Then he noticed that a large section somewhere near the centre of the Tower was completely dark.

Kristyan Fall paid a final visit to his quarters as the stealth ship began to dock with the *Castillio*. He had found himself losing concentration and this wasn't the moment. He flipped open the small cabinet over his sink unit. What he needed was inside.

He felt the ship jolt as it connected itself to the Church cruiser. His mind ran through possible ways out of the situation. He could do it. He just had to get on to the Tower.

The only loose cannon was going to be the Doctor.

Funny, but that young-looking, fresh-faced man down in the brig was proving an interesting opponent. Fall had kept him locked up precisely because he was dangerous. Although he hadn't let on, that stunt on Alpha with the Church soldiers had been totally unexpected. He knew they had only just got away. Which was why the Doctor had to be watched and kept under as tight security as possible. He played it cool but Fall wasn't fooled by that innocent demeanour. Inside, the man had a fierce intellect and an admirable instinct for survival. It would be a real pleasure to kill him when the time came.

Fall made his way to the exterior hatch and waited for the Church guards. He had the Doctor brought up to him, warning, 'I wouldn't tell anyone who you are.'

The Doctor was unable to conceal a grin. 'Sound advice.'

The hatch creaked open and in came the guards.

They were bundled through the docking tube and escorted up to the bridge. The cruiser was in a low orbit round the Tower's tiny home planet, skimming its atmosphere. The light here was pale and ghostly, like an autumn twilight.

Soldiers and clergymen swarmed round the operational consoles, tapping away at computer keyboards.

Even Fall was surprised by who was waiting for them. A large man in a gold robe, mitre in hand, seated on a ridiculously valuable throne. His eyes glowered black beneath his gigantic hat.

'Your Papal Majesty,' said Fall politely. 'An honour.'

The man who was the figurehead of the Morestran Church looked up at him humourlessly from the opulent throne. 'Cut the crap, Fall. You're in deep trouble.'

'Well, there it is,' said Ferdinand. 'The Zeta Project.'

Tegan nodded. She still couldn't take it in.

They had spent three hours ploughing through papers and documents in an attempt to fit the pieces together. Despite the open access given them by Cardinal Mantrus, it was clear that somebody wanted to keep this project a secret.

Ferdinand was on edge. He had changed since the death of Hippolito. Tegan had warmed to him at the palace but now

he appeared to be changing. It was as if the desire for revenge inside him was getting out of control, augmented by his action at the airport. His search through the papers had been feverish, angry. He ended up becoming more of a hindrance than anything else, as Tegan was forced to reshuffle papers that he regularly threw across the table in a temper. She was always aware of the beady eyes of Mantrus on them and didn't think it would take much for him to tire of their efforts and have them killed.

At last, luckily, she found the vital dossier. A memo, five years old, when they first thought it up. A complete logistical analysis of the Zeta Project. How the diplomats on Alpha Major had got hold of it she didn't know but it told them everything. A rubber stamp across the top, 'For Shredding', showed that the Church knew the document's importance. She found herself thankful for once that the Arch-Cardinal and his cronies were so corrupt: presumably they had kept hold of the dossier for potential blackmail purposes, should they need it.

She read it. Then while she sat back in shock, Ferdinand read it. Then Mantrus read it. Even the cynical old Cardinal blanched at the extent of the scheme.

"A net gain of five per cent..." Tegan muttered. 'It's so cold. Even for this place. So heartless.'

"Zeta Major to be engineered as an experimental complex", read Ferdinand, "to facilitate conversion." A way to synthesise anti-matter. Zeta Major?

Tegan glanced at the documents on the table in front of her. 'The outer planet in the Zeta System. A captured asteroid.'

"To facilitate conversion". What does it mean?'

'The Doctor will know the details.'

'I calculate that at a five per cent gain per body, they would need at least twelve specimens per ounce,' croaked Mantrus, the papers hanging limply from his hand.

'Specimens?' bellowed Tegan. 'This is your doing! You did this! They're people!'

Mantrus glanced at Ferdinand. His amused look of 'typical woman' infuriated her even more. She felt hot tears on her face. 'You won't get away with this! The Doctor...'

Ferdinand made a move to comfort her, his round face creased with concern. Then the new Ferdinand clicked in and

the expression changed, hardened. He checked himself, lost in his own boiling mind.

'We have to get to the Tower. Get this information to the Doctor.' Tegan was ready to go now if she had to.

'Impossible,' said Mantrus. 'We are at war. Soon, the empire will discover our whereabouts and we will be forced to evacuate. We have a stand-by vessel in readiness for our departure to Archetrix. The Tower will be the first battleground. No one will get through.'

'We must get to the Doctor! Only he can...'

'No!' yelled Ferdinand, without any warning. He was incensed, burning with rage. He tore into the papers, ripping and hurling them across the room. 'We go there! Whatever manpower you've got here we use. You're not turning your back on this. We take your ship. This cancer...we go there and we kill anything that lives. We go to Zeta Major and wipe it from the face of the universe.'

Nyssa's first view of Zeta Major was nothing but the metal walls of an airlock. Along with Maran and the other prisoners, she was led out of the cramped hold where they had been crammed for what seemed like years.

She had been trying to remain stoical about her capture and yet another long journey through space. What was important was to hold on to her humanity. Nothing they could do to her could change that.

Nyssa sometimes wondered quite why she was so often tested so severely. The murder of her father by the Master, her whole home planetary system obliterated in a random spread of entropy and now this. She wondered what it would take to break her. She believed that only her sense of justice and desire to help others had kept her from madness for so long. That was what separated her from people like the Master, or that Dean at the Academy. They had lost something, a vital part of themselves.

From her early days on Traken she had been instilled with the belief that rationality, science and conscience would lift people into a better life, to shatter the bonds of the animal from which they had evolved. Nyssa still believed that maxim, and the more cruelty and evil she encountered with the Doctor the more she was determined to combat it, to prove that intelligent life could be better, could improve.

Inside everyone lurked a beast, an animal striving to be free. The job of life was to control the beast, to tame it. As far as Nyssa was concerned, after all that had happened to her this was the prime reason she had not succumbed to despair.

The journey had given her time to get to know Maran. She liked the older woman, who had filled in more gaps in her knowledge of the Zeta Project.

As they had lain in the hold, crushed with bodies, she had explained her involvement with the Cult of Science.

'I was young,' she said. 'In love with the Academy. It was the only place a woman could really do anything. I'd worked hard to educate myself, make sure I was accepted. Only when I got there I realised it was just as rotten as everywhere else. The Tower was a folly, a lie to get everyone to obey the Church. It was never meant to be finished, so I thought. Then I was contacted by one of the Cult. He told me what I wanted to hear. Said Professor Sorenson had been betrayed, that our deliverance didn't lie in the words of the Doctor. That the true answer lay in Sorenson's original vision, in the exploitation of anti-matter. Oh, we were a very rationalist bunch, very anti-mysticism.'

'What did you do?'

'We rebuilt a starship. A dream. To find Zeta Minor and save the empire. It seemed impossible but I was in love with the idea of breaking the rules. I never thought we would achieve it. But we did it. And you know, it wasn't as hard as everyone thought. We needed certain supplies and materials, technology we'd believed had been long forgotten. Then they would turn up, lucky coincidences, just at the right time. I was working in mission control when the ship took off. We were so happy.'

Maran's eyes misted over with tears as she recalled the day of her triumph. 'Of course, the whole plan had been infiltrated right at the outset. There was a man, Kavelli, a great leader. He had been in the Church Service. We were so smug that he had turned his back on them and joined us. He gave us all hope. Of course, the day after the ship left, we discovered that he had been lying to us, that he had been sent by the Church to make sure our mission succeeded. A month later, they came for the rest of us. My friends, well, one day they just disappeared. Had never existed. I was lucky, no one made any connections. I was so frightened. I nearly ran out on the Academy.'

‘What stopped you?’

‘There were a handful of us who escaped the round-up. We determined to find out what the Church was up to, hijacking our mission. That was when we found out about the Zeta Project. After the students started to go missing. Trouble was we didn’t get anywhere. We couldn’t get hold of any more information. Which is why I contacted you. And look where we’ve ended up.’

Nyssa gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. ‘Don’t worry, we’re not finished yet. At least we’ll be getting first-hand knowledge of the Zeta Project. If I were you I’d start thinking about how we’re going to get our information back to Alpha Major.’

After the airlock, the black guards segregated the prisoners into male and female. Monks arrived and led the men away. Nyssa and Maran stood in the sparse metal chamber, the harsh strip-lights dazzling after their time in the dark hold. There were about fifty of them, the others dressed in rags. They all looked very similar in Nyssa’s eyes, plump and placid. None spoke. Probably your standard Morestran female, thought Nyssa, cowed by centuries of domination.

A stern-looking woman dressed in a black habit arrived and ordered them to follow her to something called the ‘Lesser Ward’. ‘Lesser’ meaning women, Nyssa presumed. Typical.

As they moved, Maran shivered.

‘What is it?’ asked Nyssa.

Maran seemed pale. ‘I don’t know. Can’t you feel it? A feeling, a sensation. Oppressive. Something wrong.’

As they walked, Nyssa tried to perceive this ‘sensation’. At first she felt nothing then gradually it came to her. Maran was right. There was a chill, something breathless, alien. Almost as if her soul was being tugged away from her body. It reminded her of the anti-man on the Energy Tower. Suddenly, she felt very far from home. Like she wasn’t meant to be here.

The nun led them through a series of corridors. A few scientific-looking types walked past them without acknowledging the shuffling women. They were pale and clearly on edge. Nyssa guessed that if she spent a lot of time in this oppressive atmosphere she would get edgy herself. She noticed fire damage on the walls and doors. There was a

hint of smoke in the air. Something had happened. It looked like the Zeta Project wasn't running terribly smoothly.

The nun led them up a ramp and into a wide holding chamber lined with a series of cells. Nyssa and Maran exchanged glances. Locked up again.

Once they were inside, the nun spoke to them. 'I am Sister Ilsa.' Her voice was cold and cruel, a match for her eyes. 'You are honoured to be given the privilege of serving the Morestran Church as part of the great scheme. You will obey in all matters and make no attempt to leave. If my rules are disobeyed you will be executed without question. From this moment, your bodies have been lawfully given over to the Church. Free will is not an option. We congratulate you, Chosen Ones.'

Nyssa looked through the plexi-glass window of her cell to witness an ironic smile appear on Sister Ilsa's lips. The speech had been toneless, perfunctory. 'Don't worry,' she continued. 'We will be coming for you soon.'

Everything was packed. He was ready to go.

Arch-Cardinal Constantine, head of the Morestran Church on Alpha Major, was getting out. He ordered his captain of the guard to come and collect him, to escort him to the ship.

He wasn't stupid, he knew it was all over for him. Not only must his superiors now know that Kristyan Fall was alive, but the imperial troops would undoubtedly soon arrive to tear this cathedral to pieces looking for him. Reports were coming in hourly concerning destruction of Church property on Alpha. They were killing priests. Antonio had gone mad.

Well, he hadn't got where he was by being careless. If there was any danger at all he would avoid it. There was a forgotten little monastery on a moon in a remote system that he had prepared for such an eventuality. He would sit out the war, then make himself available to whoever won. The thought of taking anyone else with him didn't cross his mind.

He didn't even trust Mantrus any more. Let the old fool play politics with Ferdinand and that girl as much as he wanted. Get him out the way. And their insane scheme to use his escape ship to go to the Planet of Evil or whatever it was...What were they thinking? If they thought he was going to waste his chance to escape the inevitable, they were sadly misguided.

The Arch-Cardinal was breathing heavily as he sat back in his throne, waiting for his captain. The years of rich food had not been kind to his stomach but now he couldn't eat a thing. They were trying to poison him. He would have to be very careful until he was safe.

He wondered what he could have done to have avoided the situation and congratulated himself when he realised the answer was nothing. He had acted properly at all times. Once again it was the fools and the incompetents who had let him down. That and Kristyan Fall. He wished he had the Zero Man in front of him. He had thought up some very unpleasant things to visit upon his body. Make him pay for ruining twenty years of power. Why hadn't his superiors killed Fall when they had the opportunity? Another startling example of incompetence. The Arch-Cardinal knew the golden rule: never let your enemies live. Maximum violence, immediately. How could they have made such a fundamental mistake? How could they have allowed the situation to deteriorate? He would have to start sucking up to Antonio when it was all over. It wasn't impossible – he hadn't killed that stupid brother of his.

The Arch-Cardinal made a mental note to leave orders to hand Ferdinand and Tegan over to the Imperium after he was safely away. Give Antonio something to thank him for. Insurance, for the future.

There was a knock at his door. The Arch-Cardinal screwed up his tiny little eyes and reached for his revolver. 'Who is it?' he barked.

'Captain of the Guard, My Lord,' came the muffled reply.

The Arch-Cardinal sneaked up to the door, not easy for a man of his bulk. He pressed himself against the wall, holding the revolver at head height. 'Come in.'

The door opened. It was indeed his trusty captain. The man turned to see the revolver pointed at his face. 'Aha!' smirked the Arch-Cardinal. 'Surprised you, didn't I?'

The captain remained impassive. 'My Lord, reports are arriving that imperial troops have been mobilised to attack the cathedral. I suggest we leave immediately.'

'Didn't you like my little move? Not bad for an old man, eh?'

'Most amusing, My Lord.'

The Arch-Cardinal beckoned the captain inside. 'Have to be careful you see,' he was gibbering. 'Don't trust anybody. Not now.'

The captain unsheathed his sword. 'Don't worry. The ship is ready. We will be gone within a degree.'

'Good, good. Take my bags. Hurry.'

Without waiting, the Arch-Cardinal scurried out of his room. Soldiers were positioned outside. He was glad to see the captain had brought his personal retinue with him. They stood in the antechamber, swords drawn. 'Good lads, good lads.' He felt a brief moment of regret that they would all be killed when the Imperium stormed the cathedral.

Something cold and sharp sliced the back of his right hamstring. He dropped his revolver and fell to his knees on the stone flagstones. The retinue looked on impassively. The back of his leg was on fire. He screamed in agony.

As he wept and felt the blood seeping out of him, the captain walked round to face him. His sword was stained and dripping.

'Oh God, no,' whimpered the Arch-Cardinal.

The captain's expression remained unchanging. 'Sorry, My Lord,' he said. 'Orders.'

'Please don't kill me. You're supposed to protect me. I'll take you with me, I swear!'

The retinue moved closer. Some of them were grinning.

The Arch-Cardinal clasped his hands together, as if in prayer. 'I'm begging you...what do you want? Gold, jewels? They're yours. Take them.'

The captain raised his sword again. He spoke to his men.

'Remember, this is to be done slowly.'

The Arch-Cardinal howled. 'Please God, no!'

'You fat pig,' sneered the captain. They started to carve.

Mantrus found him some time later. They had been waiting for an answer to their request to travel to Zeta Major. Time was of the essence, as imperial troops had begun to mass at the cathedral gates. Suspicious, Mantrus decided to find out what the delay was.

He found the Arch-Cardinal in the antechamber. Whoever had done it had been very thorough.

Without a pause, Mantrus turned and found the nearest functionary. 'Prepare the ship,' he stated simply. 'I need a squad of men. We leave in one degree.'

As the functionary hurried away, Mantrus went back to tell Ferdinand and Tegan the good news.

Chapter Twelve

The Church cruiser *Castillio* docked with the Energy Tower. Numerous tiny jets of vapour hissed from stabiliser vents as the bulky vessel fastened itself on to the white metal. They were landing near the anti-matter storage bays. The section that had gone dark.

'Lucky for us we got here first,' said His Papal Majesty Luciani XVII. 'Not so lucky for you.'

Kristyan Fall just smiled. All the cronies were here: Czieszko, Morelli, Doughtonville, Alexander. All the bigwigs. They must have decided, quite sensibly, that if they were to survive the civil war their best chance lay on the Energy Tower.

'No one's answering our calls. It's like the whole Tower's empty. Just what have you been doing up there?' asked Cardinal Morelli.

'Working,' replied Fall succinctly.

'Funny man.'

'Relatively.'

Only the timely intervention of Cardinal Alexander prevented Morelli striking Fall.

As Head of the Church Service, Fall had read confidential dossiers on all the ruling clerics. They could have been clones: ambitious, greedy and prone to psychotic acts of violence. Paranoid schizophrenics. They had got where they were through brutality and cunning. All of them were capable of breathtaking damage with minimal motivation. He hoped the Doctor would stay out of their way.

'Now you show us the Zeta Project,' said Luciani. 'I want to know what you've been doing to my Tower.'

'You show us what you've done, then we sew up your mouth.' Morelli was foaming. 'Put a little rat inside for company...'

'Docking complete, Your Majesty,' whispered the cruiser's captain.

'Is the squad prepared?'

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

'Rip out your fingernails and use them on your eyes,' said Morelli.

'Gentlemen, we are about to become the most powerful men in the universe.' Luciani seemed taken aback by his own words. '*Torre del Oro* is ours.'

Fall could almost see the mental back-slapping and hand-rubbing amongst the cardinals. He felt his own rage begin to rise, a rage that had been becoming more extreme of late.

'Wait,' said the Doctor.

Oh no.

The Pope and his cardinals stared at this brightly dressed, determined figure they had forgotten about.

'Who the hell are you?' asked Alexander.

Fall shut his eyes. The Doctor was going to ruin everything.

'I want to help. That's all I've wanted to do since I got here. You must listen to me. You mustn't go on to the Tower. Forces are at work there the like of which you cannot conceive. You have stolen what cannot be stolen: fragments from another universe. No one is answering your messages because there's nobody left unchanged to hear them. If you go to that Tower you will die.'

There was a pause. The Doctor held everyone's attention. The bald, red-robed figure of Morelli turned to his thin companion, Alexander. Fall could tell he was about to do something very dangerous. He was going to have to act quickly.

'Your Majesty,' he said quickly, 'my scientific adviser here is correct. The situation on the Tower is critical and you should stay well away.'

It worked. Luciani turned and raised a ringed finger at him. 'We will go to the Tower. Because you wish us not to.'

'No! No!' yelled Fall. 'You don't understand! You'll die! We all will!' He was enjoying this.

The Doctor joined in, helping him out. Of course, the Doctor was sincere, but that didn't matter now. 'You can't go! Desperation raised his voice higher. 'Don't you see? The infection has spread through the Tower!'

'He's right!' Fall added hysterically. 'Listen to him! Before it's too late!'

'Fall! Don't be...please, you must understand! We've got to get the anti-matter away from the Tower. I...I...I'm the Doc -'

Fall interrupted his intended statement. 'You sons of bitches!' he yelled. 'You're playing with people's lives!' He forced himself not to laugh.

The Cardinals looked on open-mouthed, astonishment on their faces.

The Doctor rushed impulsively towards Luciani. Instantly, a guard pulled an energy blaster and shot him down in a blaze of blue light. The Doctor clutched at his temples and fell to the deck. Kristyan Fall tutted. Very, very silly.

Without looking at the man on the ground, His Papal Majesty nodded to the captain of his marines. 'Tell your men to board the Energy Tower.'

He was falling through layers of consciousness. He felt the mental barriers he had so carefully constructed peel away as he spiralled down into what felt like a great black pit. Pain blazed through his mind as the voices from outside rose in a tumultuous babble. He was aware, yet unaware. His control over his mind was being reduced.

He felt himself back in the room. Its image flickered around him, unstable. Strange angles warped his perceptions, impossible colours swirled, colours that lived, scratching away at his sanity. He couldn't focus.

His companion was here, perhaps sitting in front of him, perhaps dimensions away.

A roar like thunder assaulted his senses, a gigantic voice, the like of which he knew to be impossible. He felt the voice inside him, as if it was his own voice. It spoke of infinity, of eternity, a lack of parameters, just the voice itself on and on for even scattering his being, picking it apart.

He concentrated on his true self, his temporary existence. He shut his mind, forced the pieces to become one again. It was a message. He had to concentrate, keep himself intact, remember who he was. A message. The last one he could withstand. A last cry. His own cry, from beyond time and space, beyond all sane perception. He was out in the darkness and he was the message.

They were the Elite, the best. Hatches whooshed open as the squad expertly slotted themselves into scouting positions.

Lieutenant Alfonso, Knight of the Most Holy Order, whistled once. His men halted, their energy weapons

gleaming in the whirling yellow light of the docking chamber. He was confident of success.

The orders were simple: secure the anti-matter bays inside this section of the Tower. Alfonso had no fear of the evil crystals, he had no fear of anything. All that mattered to him was his job. He had served on the *Castillio* for eight years, gaining promotion quickly in that time through opportunism and murder. As far as he was concerned, this was life as it should be lived: the biggest and strongest achieved the most. No quarter given or asked for. He had no time for the dubious merits of the secular life. Let the weak whine about goodness and mercy, see where it got them. Blood and power. That was life.

That was the way of the Church. And for that, Alfonso loved His Papal Majesty unto death. He was already working on a way of deposing his captain.

He unclipped his comm unit. Not for his men the battered inefficient weapons of the common soldier. For the knights of his order, only the old, the best, was enough. They had never failed.

‘Lieutenant Alfonso reporting ready at the main hatch. Trackers on-line.’

‘Affirmative. Hatch opening now.’

Another voice over the intercom. A voice Alfonso loved. ‘This is a historic moment. Your deeds today will be remembered with glory for centuries to come. May you be protected from the Dark Gods.’

His men were hypered up, the adrenalin shots firing into their right arms from their powered armour. They flicked the power packs on the batteries in their rifles. A chorus of sharp buzzes rang round the bay as the guns shuddered into life.

‘Squad Two, take point. Central deployment round track ops. Keep in touch.’ His serjeants nodded, their breastplates daubed with an interesting combination of symbols and threats. Their helmet plumes echoed their nods.

‘Hatch opening.’

Alfonso allowed himself a smile. It had been an age since they’d seen action. He was looking forward to the killing.

Klaxons sounded as the metal ramp in front of them dropped open. It hit the floor of the Energy Tower with a great clang.

The corridor was full of anti-men. Dozens of them. The air was thick with triumphant roars.

'Get back! Get back!' Alfonso screeched at his men.

The anti-men swarmed through the hatch and all over his squad.

They heard firing, the shrill blasts of energy weapons. And men screaming.

Luciani sat up in his throne. 'What the hell's going on?'

'Look at the monitor, Your Majesty,' uttered a breathless op.

Luciani looked. There wasn't much to see. Strobes of gunfire, smoke, teeth and torn armour. The movement was hurried, panicked. He glimpsed a soldier's helmet shatter under rending fists, a howl of exultation.

Fragments crackled through the comm speaker: 'Get back! Get back! No room! Get out of the way...weapons useless!'

'Lieutenant! Lieutenant!' shrieked the Captain of the Order into the comm unit. His face was pale, wet with sweat. 'Pull your men out of there!'

Luciani turned to his Cardinals. They too were pale and sweating. He turned back to the captain. 'No,' he said softly. 'Tell your men to stand their ground. And get reinforcements to the docking hatch. Pilot, prepare to disengage.'

'It's too late,' came a voice from the floor. The Doctor, shaking his head, fighting off the effects of the stun blast. For an instant, Luciani saw something else in his eyes, something black that made him turn away. The Doctor continued, his voice strained. 'The anti-men are on board this ship. There's no telling how many of them there are. Close your emergency hatches and keep them contained.'

'If I want your advice I'll ask for it.'

'Whether you want it or not, it's your only chance of survival. I must get on to the Tower.'

'Be silent or I'll have you executed.' Luciani was getting very tired of Fall and his 'scientific adviser', this Doctor whatever his name.

'My Lord,' said Cardinal Czieszko, his heavy-set features creased with worry, 'what are we going to do?'

'The Order will destroy these creatures. Send those reinforcements! Pilot!'

The engines began to turn over, sending a deep shudder through the deck of the bridge. 'You must let me go!' said the Doctor desperately, but Luciani had long stopped listening.

There came a great tearing sound as the bulbous cruiser yanked itself away from the side of the Energy Tower. On the monitor, Luciani watched as the docking tube wrenched itself apart like a whip. He saw a rushing of air and a furious silent wind as bodies and weaponry were hurled out into space.

The lights on the bridge dimmed red and an electronic voice cried, 'Hull integrity breached.'

'Maybe this will clean out the deck,' whispered the captain, shaken by the massacre of his men.

'I wouldn't have faith in that statement,' said the Doctor. His voice had altered timbre, sounding more confident. Luciani looked round to see a revolver pointing directly at him. 'I am somewhat tired of being ordered around,' the Doctor continued. 'You'll never learn, will you?' He spotted the bodyguard reaching for their weapons. 'I wouldn't. I'm really rather a good shot.'

Luciani shrugged indifferently in his throne. 'Where are you going to go? We can't get to the Tower.'

'Oh, I think there might be a way. Mr Fall?'

The Zero Man looked admiringly at the Doctor. 'Transference beam. Very good.'

The Doctor threw the pistol to him.

'You won't get away,' sneered Cardinal Alexander.

'Really?' said Fall, and shot him dead. The bridge rang with the report. Alexander froze, a look of surprise on his face. The expression remained as he collapsed. 'Anyone else think I won't get away?'

'There was no need for that!' snapped the Doctor in anger.

'I know. It's just so hard to resist. To be honest, I'm wondering why you've given me the gun.'

'I need you to show me to the transference chamber.'

Fall nodded, never taking his eyes off Luciani. They were right, they should have killed the agent when they had the opportunity. 'And where is the transference chamber?' he asked. 'Answer or you're going to need a lot of white smoke.'

'Deck Five,' uttered an extremely nervous pilot.

Fall turned to the Doctor. As he did so, the Captain of the Order reached for his holster. Faster than Luciani could imagine, Fall fired another shot and the man fell back over his control unit. Fall snapped round and fired at the two bodyguards, also foolishly reaching for their weapons. Within an instant, the gun was back on His Papal Majesty. 'Very, very stupid.'

‘Fall,’ said Luciani slowly, ‘what do you want? Name your price.’

‘At the moment I’d settle for your company, Your Holiness.’ He reached forward and Luciani felt himself deftly plucked from his chair. The gun barrel jammed into his cheek. The papal hat rocked and fell from his head, exposing his hairnet.

‘Come on, Doctor.’

The Doctor did as he was told. Luciani felt himself pulled towards the doors of the bridge.

From here, His Papal Majesty could hear the growls of the creatures ringing up from the lower decks. He whimpered as Fall pulled him into the lift.

The imperial fleet flashed through the purple chaos of hyperspace. Six ships altogether, including Antonio’s own personal armoured yacht.

The regent to the Morestran Empire himself had taken his preferred place in the captain’s chair and now sat, clad in his royal armour, uttering commands. The ship was already on full alert and the bridge busy with scurrying scribes.

‘Time to arrival?’ Antonio snapped. For the first time in years he felt at ease, doing a job with a straightforward purpose. Commanding a starship was a task he didn’t do often enough and it came as a welcome relief after the decades of conspiracy and backbiting. No longer were he and his family going to kowtow to the almighty Church.

‘Eight hours, My Lord,’ came an efficient reply.

‘Message from the *Marne*, My Lord,’ said the comm op. ‘Troops are in full readiness, ready to deploy at your command.’

Antonio kept clenching and unclenching his fists. The studded gauntlets felt good. ‘Tell him his orders are to proceed directly to the Energy Tower. Our warships will engage the Church fleet. He is to secure the operating systems as soon as he is able.’

‘Very good, My Lord. Transmitting now.’

‘Soon, brother. Soon,’ he whispered to himself. He found himself grinding his teeth in frustration. ‘Increase speed!’ he barked.

‘Sir, we’re already at maximum velocity. Any more power and we’ll lose our engines.’

‘Increase speed, damn you! We won’t need engines when we take the Tower. This will be a great day in Morestran

history. A day where I will hold the papal head in my hands, his blood streaming through my gauntlets, my sword singing with his pain.'

Status Report: Emergency Transmission to Agent Zero from Commander Energy Tower.

Report sent automatic pod: 18.02.99.

My Lord, the situation on this Tower has become critical. We are no longer able to contain the creatures that lie within. Our attempts to barricade the access tunnels have failed. Somehow, the anti-matter contamination has infiltrated the command section and many personnel appear to have become infected.

I have ordered a complete evacuation of remaining staff.

We first became aware of the nature of the problem yesterday morning at 1404 degrees. Our scouts in Red Sector reported a great amount of heat affecting systems and the concrete barricades beginning to melt. I ordered, according to your instruction, immediate mobilisation of troops in that section. My last report from them stated that the creatures had broken through our cordon and were proceeding quickly towards Yellow Sector. The unit commander indicated his intention to engage them immediately. I never heard from him again.

More importantly, that afternoon we had two cases of infection inside the Operation Centre. The threat was neutralised but only at the cost of five men, including the Head of Systems Engineering, Br Barley. By early evening, the outbreak became critical and we were forced to abandon the Centre. All weaponry has proved ineffective in containing the outbreak.

At the time of writing, we are down to twenty five per cent manpower capacity.

The infection continues to spread. Trusted colleagues are succumbing almost by the hour and morale is low. Nobody trusts anybody.

We are presently planning to decamp to the planet's surface where we hope to seal off all exits to the Tower and regroup in the Energy Collection facilities. We have high hopes of success.

*MESSAGE ENDS –
NO CONFIRMATION OF RECEIPT RECORDED.*

'Doctor?' asked Kristyan Fall. 'Run by me again what it is you plan to do.'

They were dashing through the corridors of Deck Five. Disturbing growls could be heard in the distance, along with gunfire, clashing steel and the death cries of unfortunate crewmen. Every now and then they passed the mummified body of yet another victim.

The Doctor was careful, but he was rushing. 'Why don't they lower the section hatches?'

Fall, pulling the reluctant Luciani along with him, replied, 'They think their troops can go in and happily wipe them out. Isn't that right, Your Holiness?'

Luciani merely snarled at him.

'It's just round this corner. By the way, Doctor, you didn't answer my question. What are you going to do?'

'What I should have done straight away.'

'Yes, I was thinking of something a little more specific than that.'

'Ah, here we are. Transference chamber.'

The Doctor halted abruptly. He gestured at Fall to stop moving.

'Doctor,' Fall hissed, 'they're not just going to let us walk out of here. His guards must be right behind us.'

The Doctor put a finger to his lips. 'Can you hear that?'

Fall cocked a head to listen. Nothing. And then padding footsteps. Lots of them. The Doctor heard the soft growl that he hoped he would never hear again. Why hadn't he kept that tin of anti-matter he'd given to Nyssa?

Two anti-men, dressed in the uniforms of Tower guards, lurched out from the transference chamber. They seemed unnaturally hunched over, their teeth bared and yellow, thick hair bunched on their heads. They sniffed at the air and caught a scent. Slowly, they turned to see the Doctor, Fall and Luciani. The volume of their growls increased.

'Incredible,' said Fall. 'Anti-matter really goes to work, doesn't it?'

The anti-men began to pace forward. The Doctor began backtracking. 'Any bright ideas?' he asked Fall.

From behind them, in the corridor, he heard a shout. 'There they are!'

The Doctor, still backing up, risked a look at the source of the shout. A squad of soldiers racing towards them. He flattened himself against the deck wall.

Fall threw Luciani into the same wall, turned and fired back at the soldiers. They scattered and began to blaze away with their energy weapons.

The Doctor felt sudden heat and he turned to see an anti-man right on top of him. He fell back and the creature screeched in triumph, poised to leap, when an energy blast caught it right in the breastbone. It collapsed, howling.

'Help me! Help me!' screeched His Papal Majesty Luciani XVII.

Fall swung him round, using his body as a shield against the firing troops. A blast caught the holy personage in the stomach. He began to scream.

'Stop firing!' yelled one of the guards. 'They've got to come up this way or die. Concentrate on those things.'

The Doctor nimbly leapt to his feet and vaulted the squirming anti-man on the ground. He felt its claws brush the underside of his plimsolls. He landed and looked back at Fall. The agent was in trouble. The second anti-man was barreling towards him.

Just as it was on him, Fall swivelled Luciani round once more and threw him with incredible force at the creature. Together, the two bodies slammed into the deck. Fall began to run.

'Look out!' yelled the Doctor as the first anti-man suddenly snapped out a claw. As Fall was dodging by, the long nails raked down his right leg. Fall fell, bellowed with rage and pumped bullets into the creature.

The Doctor grabbed his free hand and began to drag him past the danger and into the transference chamber. Both anti-men were up and running towards them, when the Doctor stabbed at the door controls. The hatch slammed shut, leaving the anti-men clubbing at its impenetrability.

As the Doctor got his breath back, he listened. The anti-men almost immediately ceased their pointless assault on the door and turned their attention to something else. A voice, agonised and desperate. 'No! I command you! I am your Holy Lord!'

The growling became gloating again. Then the wounded Luciani began to scream.

The Doctor turned away.

Fall was on the ground, examining the blood pouring from the scratches on his leg. He was fuming. 'Scum,' he whispered. 'You got me.' He was baring his teeth, wincing with fury and pain.

He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a small black phial. He uncorked it with his teeth and spat the cork away.

The Doctor noticed something had happened to the agent's eyes. Something like dread seized the pit of his stomach.

Fall sucked down whatever was in the bottle and fell back. The phial dropped to the floor. Outside, sounds of battle continued. 'How long have you been infected?' asked the Doctor.

'I'm...not infected,' snarled Fall.

'You're changing. You've been contaminated with anti-matter.'

'No! I'm all right!' Fall hauled himself to his feet. 'I only want one thing from you. I want you to solve this mess and give me my Tower.'

'I need to get to the TARDIS.'

'The wha – Oh yes, your blue box. You know where it is?'

'Roughly.'

'Right,' said Fall, and hobbled over to the transference beam controls. 'Let's get going.'

The *Marne* spiralled away from the Energy Tower. Already, automatic self-sealing repair systems were treating the hole in the ship's side. As for the Tower, its wound remained open, its innards spiralling out into space. Emergency hatches, those that still functioned, were slowly creaking into place, isolating the affected area.

Up on the bridge of the *Marne* no one really knew what to do. Until His Holiness returned, those left were unwilling to risk his wrath by doing the wrong thing. Inevitably, when he was rescued he was going to be in something of a state, and everybody knew what he was like when he was in one of his 'states'.

Frantic messages of alarm and inquisition were coming in from the other ships in the holy fleet. Thus far, no one had sufficient presence of mind to reply to them. The bodies of Cardinal Alexander, the Captain of the Order and the papal guards still lay where they had fallen.

The confusion was interrupted by the arrival of a bedraggled and bleeding Lieutenant of the Order. He stumbled on to the bridge, dragging his crimson sword. A savage cut on his forehead dripped blood into his right eye. His chest-plate was dented and torn.

He shook his head several times and blinked, trying to clear his thoughts. He looked around and spotted his captain sitting dead at his console.

Nobody spoke.

At last, Cardinal Czieszko took charge. He was the oldest of the Cardinals and supposed he was the most senior among the present company. He tried to form words, realising he was probably making a terrible mistake. 'Wha – what's going on, then?' he managed.

The officer tried to snap to attention. He looked like he was about to collapse.

'I...I don't know what to say, Your Eminence. His Holiness, he's dead.'

Czieszko opened his mouth to speak, but on receipt of this information quickly closed it again. He thought for a second.

'What did you say?' he asked gently.

'The creatures, Your Eminence. They killed him.'

Czieszko kept himself calm. 'I see. And how many of these things are on this ship?'

'About fifteen to twenty.'

'Well, that's not too bad, is it?' He gave the lieutenant a puzzled glance. The other Cardinals shrugged in ignorance. 'Is it?'

'The thing is, Your Eminence, they are impervious to our guns. Energy weapons and bullets have no effect. We've managed to destroy one of them by hacking it to pieces but we lost six men in the process.'

Czieszko digested this information. 'Now listen to me, Lieutenant!' he barked. 'I don't care if it takes fifty men to kill them. I just want it done, you understand me? Now get to it and don't come back until you've finished. And whatever happens, these creatures must not reach the bridge. We are important people! Your new Pope may be in this room at this very moment.' I know damn well he is, thought Czieszko privately, aware the other Cardinals would be thinking exactly the same thing.

The officer glanced again at his dead captain. 'Lieutenant!' bellowed Czieszko. The lieutenant nodded gravely and turned back to the lift.

Czieszko rubbed his hands. 'Excellent,' he said to his broadly smiling colleagues. 'Things couldn't be better.'

The transference beam did its job. The Doctor was thankful that at least one piece of technology did what it was supposed to do in this wretched empire. He'd had visions of being transferred out into space. Now all they had to do was get to the TARDIS.

Fall was hobbling badly but refused any help. At least this part of the Tower seemed devoid of anti-men. The Doctor didn't know how he would have reached the TARDIS with those things swarming all over them. It looked like they'd all charged into the *Marne*.

Remembering Fall's words earlier, the Doctor agreed that antimatter really did go to work when it felt like it. The Energy Tower had been transformed. Instead of the harsh white strip-lights of his previous visit, the walls and ceilings of this access tunnel glowed an unearthly purple. The contamination he had experienced in the anti-matter chambers had spread. There was that atmosphere here, that feeling of dread.

He was having to keep his eyes fixed dead ahead, towards the TARDIS that stood in the distance. Every time he looked away, at the junctures between the gantries, he had the feeling that the angles were bent, that they were wrong in some way. They moved and shifted in a disturbingly organic manner. The Doctor had the feeling that if he went in too close to the sides of the tunnel he could fall into these angles, slip into some other place inimical to human existence. It was as if these angles were pulling at his mind. How had Sarah put it? 'Drawing his soul from his body.' He increased his pace.

He heard Kristyan Fall behind him, breathing heavily. The Zero Man's voice was getting hoarser and the Doctor knew it wasn't from exertion. He remembered the last time he had brought an anti-man into the TARDIS, Sorenson, and hoped that whatever had weakened his powers would work on Fall. He wanted the agent *compos mentis*, or he would never return from where he needed to go.

The strange pulling sensation increased as they reached his faithful old ship. Must be to do with the dimensional

interfaces, too many dimensions trying to exist at once in the same place. He had to get them out of here as quickly as possible.

As the Doctor pulled the key from the chain around his neck, he spotted the descending claw just in time. He ducked and Kristyan Fall's hand slammed into the TARDIS door.

'Fall!' shouted the Doctor. 'Remember who you are! You must not give in to it! You are Kristyan Fall!'

Fall was drooling, his eyes replaced by shining red discs. The Doctor saw hair spreading out across his face. He darted out of the creature's way, behind the TARDIS.

There followed a macabre game of tag as they circled each other round the ship. Fall's feral grunts echoed through the altered Tower. Every time the Doctor reached the TARDIS door he tried to get it open, and every time he narrowly avoided a swinging blow. He tried to keep up his pep talk. 'Fall! You are Kristyan Fall! You must remember!'

On the third attempt, the Doctor got the key in the lock and twisted. The door swung open but he knew he wasn't fast enough to avoid the attack. 'Fall!' he yelled and closed his eyes.

The blow never came. The Doctor opened one eye to see the creature, arm raised, locked in some sort of internal struggle. It bellowed and yelled but pulled away from killing the Doctor.

He saw the red glow fade a little and the retinas return. Wasting no time, he grabbed the creature and hauled it into the TARDIS.

The door slammed and, seconds later, the familiar wheezing and groaning accompanied the machine's fade into thin air.

URGENT COMMUNIQUÉ – SCOUT VESSEL 'SANTA SALAMAR' TO ALL VESSELS IN THE HOLY ARMADA.

MESSAGE TIMED AT 19:02 DEGREES 15.03.99.

MESSAGE READS:

Have encountered ships emerging from hyper-space at co-ordinates 187.33T.

Six vessels including two Victory-class warships.

The Imperial Fleet has entered the system.

MESSAGE ENDS.

Chapter Thirteen

PATIENT FILE UPDATE#ZPI555/8355.

SUBJECT: 'Nyssa' – no other names available.

Visit 3 complete. Anti-matter stimulation 'A'. Anti-matter Quotient 63%.

INTERNAL COMMENT:

Patient 8355 possesses a unique physio-biological structure. Her genotype readings differ from Morestran physiology in three constituent element mixes (see attached notes: 11.03.99).

After the third treatment visit, 8355 has not responded positively to anti-matter. Her mutant biology produces considerably less than the normal yield produced by other patients.

We have no other recorded cases of such a high resistance to anti-matter and it is unlikely that Patient 8355's condition will prove problematic. As the Zeta Project is merely days away from completion any benefits from immunity can be considered negligible.

Transfer suggested for shipment 35.

Transfer confirmed: 23.05.99. Sr Ilsa.

'We have to get out,' said Maran weakly. Nyssa could barely see her in the gloom of the cell but occasionally there was a flash of red from her eyes.

They had been experimented on separately. Nyssa had never felt so alone as when they led her into the laboratory, strapped her on to the table with the harsh lights searing her eyes. She stroked the new scar on her belly and tried not to think about what the masked surgeons had put inside her. The pain wasn't too bad, she had been anaesthetised so they clearly wanted their patients to live, but she had a feeling more was on its way.

She had no idea people could be so unfeeling. To implant active anti-matter, crudely, coldly, into a fellow creature shocked her beyond measure. Sister Ilsa seemed to have taken a special interest in her, observing her closely as the surgeons did what they did.

She tried not to move around too much. She could feel the crystals turn, like something inside her was alive. How long would it take for the enzymes in her stomach to break down their constituent elements (or anti-elements)? How long before her transformation became complete?

‘Nyssa?’ asked Maran.

Her companion seemed to be altering more rapidly than she. Despite the numbness of the drugs, Nyssa didn’t think she had actually undergone any of the physical and mental changes she had seen in other patients. Maran, on the other hand, was in great pain. Her breathing was becoming hoarse and shallow, her mind unable to concentrate for any long period. She was also becoming weaker, unable to ingest the minimal food slipped into the cell for them.

‘I’m here,’ Nyssa replied. ‘I don’t know if there is a way to escape.’

‘We must,’ said Maran, her voice low and stifled, ‘I can’t go on like this.’

‘Try to rest. We can’t do anything until think of a way to get out of the cell.’

‘I’m afraid...so afraid.’

Nyssa went to comfort her friend. She reined in her anger at those who had done this to them. She must keep her mind occupied on the practical matters of getting away.

Her stomach began to growl.

Tegan was dreaming. She was dreaming about black curtains.

Someone had bundled her up inside them in a big house. She knew it was a big house because she had been walking around inside it for a long time. She had been looking out of a great window at the night sky when something had wrapped her up into these black velvet curtains. Funny, but that had seemed like a long time ago.

Now she was fully occupied trying to free herself. It seemed that every time she pulled the material away, more would be twisted over her face and hands to prevent her gaining advantage. It was like some sort of macabre game.

These curtains were amazingly black, blacker than anything she had ever seen. She was getting very, very frustrated. 'Oh rabbits!' she yelled, spitting out a piece that had wormed its way into her mouth.

Then she heard the footsteps. Big, heavy footsteps but carefully placed, as if someone was trying to muffle their approach. And a strange inanimate slapping sound, like someone tenderising steak.

Tegan stopped struggling. She didn't know who was out there but she knew they weren't...right. She felt waves of hatred like a forcefield. She stood still, letting the curtains envelop her.

It was looking for her.

It was giggling, like Mr Punch. That was it, it was Punch, with its alabaster features twisted into a never-ending smile, slapping his stick against his plaster hand. '*Jud-ee!*' it said brightly. '*Jud-ee!*'

Tegan knew she had to keep still, very still. Maybe then it would miss her, leave her alone. She just had to keep still.

'*Jud-ee!*'

She felt the curtains twist tighter and tighter. She could see nothing but undulating blackness, swamping everything, getting into her nose and mouth again.

Hands began to ruffle the curtains, searching for her.

'*Jud-ee!*' came the happy voice, inches away from her ears. '*That's the way to do it!*'

Go away, Tegan thought desperately, like a prayer. Please, just go away.

The curtains were ripped open and a white light blazed into Tegan's eyes.

'*Found you!*' he screamed. Mr Punch raised his stick.

She was screaming when they pulled her from the suspended animation tank. 'It's all right, Tegan, it's all right,' she heard Ferdinand telling her, soothing her. She blinked the ice from her eyes and felt herself pulled into the light.

As consciousness returned she wondered what possessed her when she'd thought she'd wanted to travel. She'd had enough of that to last a lifetime. Out of all the methods of moving a body through space this had to be one of the most unpleasant.

'I had a dream,' she muttered blankly as they carried her over to a trolley. There was a hot stab in her arm and warmth

began to return. 'Blackness...someone laughing...going to kill me...'

'You aren't the only one,' said Ferdinand. 'We've had a dozen cases so far. Must be something to do with the length of the journey. We're right on the edge here.'

'No, I think it might have been something else.' She remembered the uncomfortable trances the Doctor had experienced when they had first reached the Energy Tower. 'He said it was a...a message...' Consciousness was slipping away again as the drug went to work on her brain. She listened to Ferdinand; his voice sounded light years away.

'Sleep now, Tegan. Don't worry. When you wake up, then we'll begin.'

The Arch-Cardinal's ship was modelled on the old Space Service design: dual-engine catamaran in shape, blue mottled hydron tanks sticking out of the white hull like stalks.

Tegan watched their arrival in the Zeta System on the external monitor. Like others before her, she viewed the alien backdrop with unconscious dread. She didn't need to be told they were a long way out; just one look told her she was in a place she wasn't supposed to be.

The distant nebulae reminded her uncomfortably of the smothering curtains. Their shapes were distorted somehow, unlike anything she had seen in the TARDIS. And the blackness behind them was too intense, as if it was a new colour, beyond the range of her perception. Zeta's sun, a tiny and limpid orb in the distance, offered no warmth, no comforting light. The ship felt very small, insignificant against the malevolence that the void seemed to threaten.

The crew, Church technicians, were busying themselves in preparation for a landing. Ferdinand, in charge and still hyperactive for revenge, explained that they wouldn't see Zeta Minor itself for at least another day, it being far out on a distant ellipse. They were looking for Major, the trapped asteroid, which had not yet been charted on the navigation computer. He sat huddled over the consoles for hours on end, searching endlessly for the research station.

'It appears that they have screened the Zeta Project from our sensors,' said Cardinal Mantrus. The old man was pacing the sparse bridge, hovering round his new master.

'What weaponry are we carrying?' Ferdinand asked on one of the rare occasions he looked up.

'Two cobalt missiles. The Arch-Cardinal loved his technology. And his paranoia knew no bounds.'

'Prepare them.'

Mantrus smiled a thin smile. He seemed to be looking forward to the idea of destruction.

Tegan made up her mind to speak to Ferdinand, to try and calm him down. She approached the console gingerly, not wanting to set him off on one of his rants.

'And what about the patients? They haven't done anything.'

He nodded, distracted. 'It's out there somewhere. Why can't we find it?'

'You don't even care, do you?'

'Are you trying to be funny?' He looked up, irritated by her distraction. Mantrus took a step forward but Ferdinand waved him away.

Tegan held her temper. 'No. I just want you to think about it.'

'Really?' He wasn't listening.

She punched his arm and pulled him away from the screen. 'Look at me when I'm talking to you!'

She stepped back as he stood up. White fury transformed his round face. For a second, she thought he was going to hit her back. 'Go on, then, if it makes you feel better!' she yelled. The crew stopped, nervously watching the conflict. Mantrus squinted at her, wanting her to shut up.

Ferdinand stared straight at her through his round glasses. Tegan saw the frustration and hate that had motivated him all these years. A fire burned inside him. A muscle pulsed in his neck. Then he dropped his gaze, breathing deeply. 'You don't understand,' he hissed.

'Oh yeah?' Tegan snapped. 'And what makes you so special? What makes you so different?'

'Don't you realise what happened back there? I murdered a man I loved. Whom I trusted with my life.'

'I understand that there's nothing else left in you. You remember the lake? At the palace? Well, I can't see any of that Ferdinand left. That man is gone, replaced by...by a little kid who got mad because the world didn't run the way he wanted. And I for one am not going to let you lead us down into that base and get us all killed because you can't stand the fact that life isn't fair.'

Ferdinand was shaking with rage. He bunched a fist and smashed it on to the navigation computer. 'I will have my revenge!'

Tegan turned away. She was disgusted with him. 'Good for you. And when does it stop? You've chased the Church for ten years, then you killed Hippolito. Now you're going to wipe out this research base. What next? Don't you see, Ferdinand, it never ends. You just have to learn to deal with it before you lose yourself completely. Ferdinand, please. Remember that man you were, the one I went out on the lake with. I want him back. I want him leading us.'

He said nothing. Tegan became uncomfortably aware of the eyes of Mantrus and the crew on them. Crew that a week ago were in the employ of their enemies. What would it take for them to turn again?

Ferdinand sat back in his chair. He seemed to be in pain, trying to filter out her words. 'I...I'll think about what you said.'

Mantrus was furious. 'Ferdinand!'

'I said I'll think about it. Just find the Zeta Project!'

They were led from their cells into the same holding area where they had arrived. Nyssa was now very scared. A handful, her and the pale Maran included, were still capable of walking. That wasn't what scared her. What scared her were the cages rolled in on trolleys containing groups of snarling anti-men. And anti-women.

'Hold here!' ordered Sister Ilsa, looking more than a little nervous herself. She stood above them, on a gantry. The guards, now clad in white protective suits complete with masks and gloves, shoved the cages into the pen and moved away.

'What's going on?' came a muffled voice from one of the guards.

'An intruder in the system. Not one of the scheduled ships,' replied the sharp-voiced Ilsa. She was dressed in a white medical tunic but wore no mask. 'We're to wait until they move on. They won't detect us, not with the deflectors in place.'

For the first time in weeks Nyssa felt a surge of hope. Could it be the Doctor? It would be so like him to turn up just at the right time.

The creatures in the cages screeched angrily and threw themselves against the wire. She felt the anti-matter lying inside her and prayed that rescue was on its way.

The guard captain was still clearly unhappy. 'I don't like this. Look at them. We should get them on the shuttle.'

Ilsa gave him a cruel stare. 'Perhaps you would like to pursue the matter with d'Undine. I'm sure he would be most interested in your views. It'll only be an hour or so. Just seal off the holding tank. And get some more men here.'

Nyssa felt an arm on her shoulder. It was Maran, looking very ill. 'I'm changing, Nyssa. Help me...'

Nyssa saw the red glint burning in her eyes. Maran's hands were twisting and Nyssa felt that familiar pulling sensation. 'Maran! You must hold on!' she hissed. 'Did you hear that? Somebody's come looking for us.'

Maran fell away, shaking violently. Her teeth chattered. 'I think it's too late, I can't stop it this time.' She collapsed.

Nyssa looked up to the gantry. 'Help her!' she cried desperately.

She noticed the guards begin to back away. 'Get her in the cage! Get her in the cage!' yelled the captain. His men took no notice, continuing to back towards the open hatch, guns raised.

Maran began to thrash around on the metal floor, oblivious to Nyssa's attempts to calm her. 'Help me!' she shrieked. 'Don't let it happen to me!'

The anti-men in their cages were leaping and roaring, filling the echoing tank with unearthly shrieks and bellows. 'Shoot her! Shoot her!' screamed Ilsa from the gantry.

Suddenly, Nyssa felt something lurch inside her own body. A red mist, a fury, boiling up through her. 'No,' she moaned. 'No!'

She held up her hands as pain seized the joints and muscles. Something was moving under the skin, shaping, coarsening her body. She felt her consciousness fading as something, someone else, took hold.

She heard a shot, the sound clanging round the holding tank. Then Maran was roaring in her ear and leaping over her. A voice: 'Nyssa! Go! Go now!'

Maran was met by a hail of bullets as she bounded towards one of the cages. Nyssa watched as she ripped it open. Anti-men spilled out into the room. Instantly, they were in amongst the white suits, tearing and rending.

‘I must... must fight it,’ Nyssa ordered herself. ‘Not give in...’

With her last shreds of control, she managed to haul herself up. A claw swung towards her then stopped. She saw a woman, a face full of fur and mad red eyes, pull back her blow, not interested. The creature turned and joined the fighting throng.

‘She recognised me,’ Nyssa whispered. ‘She knew I was one of them.’

She saw soldiers being pulled apart. One unfortunate was attempting to climb his way up to the gantry, his gauntleted hands scrabbling at the smooth walls. A multitude of claws grabbed at his suit and hauled him back into the onslaught. His mask was pulled away from his head as claws and teeth went to work.

Cradling her crooked limbs, Nyssa clambered through the struggling soldiers and squeezed through the door, just as it hissed closed. She heard the shouting and screaming fade behind her as she joggled as best she could out of the light. She held herself together with Sister Ilsa’s words: ‘Intruder in the system. Intruder in the system.’

She kept moving to wherever the main computer might be.

D’Undine switched off the monitor. Sister Ilsa’s flushed and panicked face disappeared in a blip of light.

‘What does she think she’s doing?’ he snapped to his office wall, as once again he was forced to strap on his gunbelt. He trotted out into the control room.

That fool Administrator Yarrow was running around in there, panicking and making everything worse. ‘Thank God you’re here, d’Undine,’ he stuttered. ‘It’s all gone wrong!’

‘Shut up,’ replied d’Undine contemptuously. ‘Situation?’ he bellowed at the technicians.

The ops manager swivelled round in his chair. His monk’s habit seemed incongruous in the modernistic control room. ‘The outbreak has been contained, Monsignor. None of them got out of the holding pen. I’ve ordered the reserve squad to mobilise.’

D’Undine nodded. ‘This is happening too often.’

‘What about Launch 35?’ stammered Yarrow.

‘Cleared and ready, sir. Waiting for the word.’

‘And the intruder?’

The ops manager inclined his head towards the tracking sensors. 'Looks like it's still engaged on a random sweep. I wouldn't worry.'

'But what if they find us?' Yarrow again. D'Undine was on the verge of having him thrown into the holding pen. Feed him to the anti-men.

'We're so small, it'd take them weeks.' D'Undine was glad to see the ops manager as annoyed with the fussy little administrator as he was. Still, this ship and whoever was in it were more than a nuisance. Until it went away they weren't going to be able to get their cargo down to Zeta Minor.

He'd thought it might be Fall – they hadn't had word from the Tower for some time. He wanted to know what was going on out there.

'Damn. And we're nearly finished. All right, keep watching.'

Running feet heralded the arrival of a very flustered-looking Sister Ilsa, her blonde hair flat and filthy, her white smock speckled with blood.

'I'm sorry, Monsignor. It was one of the patients, it happened so quickly.'

'You idiot. You should have spotted it.'

Ilsa shook her head. 'There was nothing I could have done.'

D'Undine snorted. 'Then what's the point in you being here?' He pulled his revolver from his gunbelt. The control room fell silent. Sister Ilsa, clearly realising her position, looked around for help, receiving none. Yarrow was gulping like a fish.

D'Undine smiled. He enjoyed these little dramatic moments. He milked it for all it was worth. Slowly, he raised the revolver. 'This is what happens when you give a woman a man's job.'

Sister Ilsa held out her hands as if to ward off the bullet. 'No, please, listen. One of the patients has...'

D'Undine shot her through the heart.

As her body hit the floor, the emergency klaxon started up again. D'Undine spun round, his revolver still smoking. 'What now?'

'Look!' shouted Yarrow and pointed to a monitor. The main computer centre. D'Undine caught a glimpse of a filthy patient's smock and a mass of brown curly hair. It dashed out of view.

'Get after her!' ordered d'Undine. 'Kill her!'

It was all going too fast. He had to get the situation under control. The patient must have sneaked into the computer room in the emergency. Sneaked in for what? All of a sudden, he felt his stomach curdle with fear. 'What has she done?'

The ops manager dashed to a terminal. 'Why weren't you watching?' he yelled at the shocked operator. He was sweating as he tapped away at the keyboard.

'What is it? What's going on?' Yarrow was shrieking, his head bobbing like a bird.

The ops manager turned to d'Undine. His face was grim. 'I don't know how she's done it but...'

'But what?'

'Somehow, she's re-encoded the sensor deflector system. I can't get back in.'

'What does that mean? How did she do it so quickly?'

'She's switched it off.' The ops manager turned pale. 'We're visible.'

D'Undine froze. His jaw dropped slowly open. He stared at the external monitors. 'Holy —'

Yarrow began to cry.

- LRS REPORT TIMED AT: 06-22 ST.

- READING REC'D 2.9 DEGREES INTO OPERATION.

- SENSORS INDICATE CATEGORY H ORBITING BODY IN ZETA SYSTEM, ZSYSCO-ORDINATES PER ASTRAL CHARTS: 16.33.53. NO PREVIOUS RECORD OF ORBITING BODY. AUTO CHART UPDATE COMMENCING.

- ENERGY READINGS 74% ABOVE STANDARD NATURAL OCCURRENCE MARK.

- ENTERING STANDARD MORESTRAN IDSYS: 'ZETA MAJOR'.

'We've found it, My Lord,' stated the navigations officer.

Tegan watched Ferdinand straighten up and knew that she had lost him. The discovery couldn't have come at a worse moment.

'Identity confirmed,' said Mantrus smugly, peering into the navsystems monitor. 'This must be it.'

Ferdinand started to speak, then changed his mind. He looked at Tegan. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'This has to be done.'

Tegan shook her head. 'You're going to kill I don't know how many people. You've made it too easy. What more can I say?'

Ferdinand nodded slowly. Again, he pondered Tegan's words. 'You're too late,' he said at last. 'I am lost.'

As Tegan watched, he stood up and approached the main viewer, ordering it brought on-line. Someone had unconsciously turned it off, to block out the insane vista outside the ship. She felt suddenly sad for him. She knew too well the cost of allowing emotions to overwhelm reason. She wasn't exactly known for her cool detachment but at least she felt she used her temper wisely. She wondered with despair just how far he would be willing to go. And whether he would realise the cost to himself of these actions.

'Prepare the cobalt missiles.' Ferdinand's voice was calm, the calmest she'd heard it in weeks.

'Picking up the asteroid on visual now, Commander.'

Tegan felt the familiar unease run through her. This time, however, there was something else, something apart from the spacescape. A spherical rock, nothing more than a tiny speck, growing in the emptiness.

'Zeta Major,' she said breathlessly.

'In range in three minutes,' said the navigations officer.

'Arm warheads,' ordered Ferdinand.

'Arming,' came a voice from a speaker.

The asteroid grew enough to make out details on its surface. It seemed nothing but a rock. Suddenly, Tegan spotted the metal plate built on to its surface. Small but unmistakable. And a ship, hidden in shadow. Must be a shuttle or whatever they called them. As they watched, the shuttle began to lift away from the metal plate. It turned itself round and flew low over the planet's surface.

'Let it go,' said Ferdinand. 'We know where it's heading.'

'Warheads armed,' stated the toneless voice on the speaker.

'Sir,' said the comms officer, unexpectedly, 'we're receiving a communication from the Zeta Major facility.'

'On speaker.'

The voice was harsh, someone cruel trying to be nice. To Tegan, it sounded like a bully taken to the police house to explain himself. 'This is Zeta Major. We surrender. I have

ordered our docking hatches cleared for your arrival. No offensive action will be taken against your ship. I repeat: we surrender. Awaiting your response.'

The channel flicked closed. Ferdinand rubbed his chin. He seemed deep in thought. Tegan was relieved. He had been given a way out. 'Well,' she said. 'Send the reply.'

Without looking at her, Ferdinand said softly, 'Prepare to fire. On my mark.'

COMMUNIQUÉ – ZETA PROJECT – URGENT KRISTYAN
FALL – 23.05.99 NCC.

Have been detected by a Church survey ship. Sensor deflector sabotaged and rendered inoperative. Boarding unavoidable but have released final batch of prepared patients into docking areas to surprise invasion party. Hope that you do not object to this usage of specimens. Situation is critical and am aware that project is already ready for implementation (with two per cent surplus already in place).

Am warning you of Church action and hope you will be able to take appropriate punitive steps. Will appreciate aid when you send it.

I am unsure when this communique will reach you but am confident all will be resolved upon delivery.

P.S. Have resolved difficulties with the command of Lesser Ward. Look forward to your reply.

D'Undine

The cobalt missiles hit the Zeta Project precisely on target. The first exploded against the defensive metal dome, bursting it open and sending an expanding fireball down through the docking portals, incinerating the anti-men waiting there, and along the access tunnels to the main complex.

The second missile burrowed through the flame into the gouged-open facility, detonating thirty feet over the sealed control room where d'Undine, Yarrow, the ops manager and the rest of the command crew were awaiting the never-to-arrive boarding party. The explosion produced a shock wave so powerful that the men inside were flattened by the hurtling metal ceiling plates, seconds before immolation in the blast itself. The shock wave then breached the deeply buried oxygen and flammable fuel reservoirs, which ignited in a third explosion huge enough to tear Zeta Major in half.

The Arch-Cardinal's ship banked and fired its emergency boosters, allowing the modified vessel to outrun the expanding shock wave circling out from the ruined asteroid.

Launch 35, on its way to Zeta Minor, was not so lucky. On the bridge, the captain responded to the sudden overloading of his flight systems by attempting a manual boost injection. He gained himself four seconds of time before the diminishing wave caught his ship and flipped it over. The captain, a highly trained Church Service pilot, managed to cut his atmospheric aerilons into the wave and use their momentum to reduce his steep and suicidal angle. After being carried along for thirty-eight seconds, the wave passed over them and the ship's stabilisers came into effect. However, all drive systems were destroyed and the hull received fifty-five per cent structural damage.

Thanks to the captain's handling, casualties were minimal. Until the patients got loose, that is.

Comms Officer Ingham was monitoring activity on Launch 35. The crew on the bridge, awestruck by the annihilation of Zeta Major, were silent; transfixed and stunned in equal measure.

Tegan was unable to look. It had all been too dry, too abstract. It might have been a scene from a movie. Too easy to forget how many they had killed. 'Horrible...horrible,' she whispered.

Ferdinand was a rock, unmoving in his command chair. 'Bring us closer to that vessel.' He spoke in a monotone. The red lights of battle alert transformed his expressionless face into a jumping mosaic of blood.

'The energy wave has dissipated, Commander. Sensors back in operation.'

'Sir, I am receiving a distress call from the shuttle craft.'

'On speaker,' said Ferdinand.

Mantrus turned away from the main viewer. The lights in his delighted eyes made him appear ten years younger. 'All gone,' he giggled. 'All gone...'

The speaker crackled into life. For a moment, Tegan thought that the residue of the shock wave was causing interference, until she realised that what she was hearing was shouting. And another noise. Animal roars. 'Oh my God,' she said.

'We are under attack...require immediate assistance... seal it off! All of them!'

Ferdinand raised his hand in a chopping motion and Ingham switched off the speakers.

'Well?' said Tegan.

'Nothing we can do,' replied Mantrus smugly. 'They're all dead.'

'Rubbish,' Tegan insisted. 'Come on, Ferdinand. There must be some feeling left in you.'

'What do you want me to do?' Still the monotone.

'I want you to act like a man. More than people like him –' she pointed at Mantrus, who gave her a condescending sneer. 'OK, it's dangerous and it may be a waste of time and those people on that ship are responsible for some hideous things, but you've got to be better than them. You have to help them.'

'Words,' said Mantrus. 'The prattlings of a child. Why don't you help them, if you're so noble?'

'All right, I will. Get me a gun. I'll go on my own if I have to.'

'No.' At last Ferdinand moved. He stood up and walked over to Tegan. As he stared at her, she saw something in his eyes. Something broken. 'All right,' he said simply.

The airlock hissed open. The search party moved into the crippled Launch 35.

Tegan stared through her face plate into the darkness of the hold. Bodies floated in the air, the gravity magnets disabled. Some of the bodies were white-suited guards, others were dressed in soiled tunics, their faces and bodies distorted, feral. All were dead; explosive decompression. Tegan tried not to look. Her breathing increased and steamed up her face-plate. She was thankful. It wasn't just the lack of gravity that made her feel sick.

'The crew must have sealed off the bridge. Decompressed the ship.' Ferdinand was striding ahead, leading the four members of the boarding party. They headed towards a functional closed hatch at the front of the shuttle.

The two marines were alert and watchful. They shouldered their carbines and followed their commander to the hatch. Tegan wasn't sure but she presumed guns weren't going to be much use in a vacuum. She let her own weapon go. It hung in front of her, as if refusing to be discarded.

Ferdinand knocked on the hatch and received the immediate reply of three taps from the other side. 'Someone's alive anyway.'

Tegan's attention was distracted by movement back near the docking hatch. She turned slowly, trying to keep her balance in the zero gravity. Movement again. 'Ferdinand,' she said, starting to get nervous. Maybe they could survive in the airlessness. Maybe it was all a trick, and these floating bodies and all that mess were suddenly going to leap into life and smother her like in that dream.

'All right, Tegan,' said Ferdinand, placing a hand on her shoulder. 'It's all right.'

'I saw something. Those spacesuits.'

'Must be a leakage of some kind. Stay here if you're frightened.'

Tegan pushed herself away from Ferdinand. 'I am not frightened...whoa!' She found herself moving forward a little too quickly for her magnetic boots.

Ferdinand pulled her back. 'Careful. We'll go together.'

They clambered through the bodies and equipment towards the hanging pressure suits, stowed like shop dummies near the docking hatch. There was definitely movement. Faint, but movement.

Someone was inside one of the suits. Someone short whose face didn't quite reach the helmet visor. Someone with curly brown hair.

'Nyssa!' said Tegan as she reached the suit. It moved feebly, responding to her voice. Tegan moved forward but stopped as a gloved arm reached for her. It swung a wild blow. Tegan nearly overbalanced getting out of the way. 'Nyssa, it's me! Tegan!'

She avoided a second blow as Ferdinand grabbed the suit. Tegan stood on tiptoe, magnetic boots whining. She stared down into the faceplate. Red eyes glared back.

Nyssa was no longer human.

Chapter Fourteen

Red mist. Pain. Anger.

He had to pull himself back.

The presence inside him screamed for release, a hunger that defied control.

It was him but not him A beast, a creature distilled from the wild turmoil of his unconscious; a part of him that had been programmed into his genetic structure millions of years before. Now it was powerful; now it roared for release.

Kristyan Fall. He was Kristyan Fall. The Doctor's words hung in front of him like a lifeline. He concentrated on them. He was the Zero Man, the best. Nothing could take him away from himself. The creature inside was just another conquest, an enemy to be outwitted and crushed.

He barely felt the Doctor shackling him to the wall, didn't even know where he was. He was Kristyan Fall and no one in the universe could stop him. His eyes burned red. He concentrated on that. If he could clear his eyes, if he could defeat the red mist, the rest would follow. He had to fight, fight, fight.

He remembered his childhood, a thousand years ago: five years old, shackled to another wall, the old priest Father Dyer burning him Pokers in his skin, to toughen him up. He remembered fighting, ignoring the pain, sending it away. He was Kristyan Fall and he could never be tamed. He felt Dyer's dying breath on his cheek, when he had slipped his chains and taken his revenge. No one could stop him. He was the best. He was Kristyan Fall.

He felt the fire burn into his mind. He felt the brands burn into his skin. Pain reached in and pierced his nerve centres. It wanted him, the creature, it wanted him. Never. Never.

'Never!' he howled and it was gone.

No, not gone. Weakened. Broken. The red mist cleared. For now.

Kristyan Fall looked up. He was inside a large room with circular panels on the walls. The floor vibrated softly. An angular machine dominated the centre of the room A man

was nervously hopping around it, someone he knew. The Doctor.

'Feeling better?' the Doctor asked.

'Where am I?'

'The TARDIS. We're on our way.'

Fall tried to stand, then remembered the shackles. His leg ached. 'I'm back.'

The Doctor was rushing, flicking away at switches. 'Yes. I flooded the control room with zero particles. Dangerous but it should have helped you stabilise your condition. Tricky things, zero particles. Not really certain how it worked myself.'

'You can cure anti-matter sickness.'

The Doctor shook his head, his fair hair matted with perspiration. 'Only temporary, I'm afraid. To do with dimensional resonances. Once we get there you're on your own.'

'Zeta Minor?'

'I only hope I'm in time.'

'In time for what?'

'Oh, before your Energy Tower reaches critical mass and destroys the galaxy. You saw how irradiated the structure had become. Funny, I never realised anti-matter could spread osmotically. Makes sense.'

'We never had a chance with the Zeta Project, did we?' he said, gauging the Doctor's reaction. If only he'd got hold him when it all first started, he could have done it properly.

'I'm afraid not. The two worlds can never mix. It simply isn't possible.'

Fall nodded ruefully. If he could gain the Doctor's confidence... 'Still, it was a good try.'

Something changed in the Doctor's expression. He flushed and his shoulders tensed. Fall realised he had misjudged the situation.

'Good?' the Doctor said sardonically. 'You call it good? Don't you realise what you've done? Don't you think I know how you removed the anti-matter from Zeta Minor?'

'We thought we were doing the right thing.' Fall kept his voice even. If the Doctor lost his temper, he might find a weakness, something to be exploited.

The Doctor clutched the lapels of his jacket. He stared upwards, not looking at Fall. 'How do you take something that can't be taken? You put something else in its place. Best of

all you put the same thing in its place. The only way to remove anti-matter from Zeta Minor, to achieve the impossible, is to replace what you steal with more anti-matter. Or a different sort of anti-matter.'

'We did what had to be done.'

'No! You did what you should never have done! There's a big difference between solving a perceived energy crisis and this. All because your greedy little empire couldn't be content with what it had.'

Fall deliberately relaxed himself, slumping against the wall. 'So, Doctor. Tell me. What did we do?'

The Doctor raised a finger, as if delivering a lecture. He began to pace the control room. 'You landed a small expedition on the planet. You deliberately infected people with anti-matter. You forced their cells to hybridise, probably with the help of a little neutron acceleration. The effect of this was: you synthesised new anti-matter in living cells. Eureka! You now had a surplus, which allowed you to remove the excess to this installation on Zeta Major, where you could implement the same process on a much larger scale.' He turned for the first time to Fall. 'Your yield must have been incredibly low. Just how many did you use up in this... this abomination?'

'Listen, Doctor. You're right. It was evil. Wrong -'

'How many?'

'I see now. It could never work. I want to help you. For the sake of -'

'How many!'

Fall stopped talking. He dropped his head. 'Eight thousand. Approximately.'

The Doctor turned away, disgust obvious on his face.

Fall rattled his chains. 'It's different now. Get me out of these things.'

The Doctor shook his head. It seemed an eternity before he spoke. When he did his voice was weary, drained. 'In time. I didn't trust you when you were fully human, so now...' He seemed to compose himself. 'Anyway, if you don't mind I've got rather a lot to -' Suddenly, the Doctor clutched at his temples. His face turned grey and he fell on to the console. 'Black tide... symbol of antimatter contagion... I must... not... not... allow...' He was gritting his teeth with the strain.

Eventually, after some minutes, he stood up again. He turned sheepishly to Fall. 'As you can see, I'm suffering from

a slight case of mental incursion myself. I just hope I can sort all this out before it destroys me.'

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – 'IMPERIAL PRIDE' to 'MARNE'.

Code 12. Timed at 09:13.

- Have engaged Church fleet. Flagship 'Castillio' is listing. We are preparing boarding party. Cruisers 'Triumph' and 'Fury' acting as spearhead and have locked with Church troop vessels. Proceed to Tower.

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – 'MARNE' to 'IMPERIAL PRIDE'.

Code 12. Timed at: 09:22.

- Instructions acknowledged. Church troop ship is bearing upon us. Expect boarding party within 1.8 degrees. Will continue to Tower.

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – 'FURY' to 'IMPERIAL PRIDE'.

Code 15. Timed at: 09:55.

- Have successfully boarded Church troop carrier. Minimal damage to hull. Casualties heavy. Marines approaching drive section of hostile ship. Gas weapons in use.

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – 'IMPERIAL PRIDE' to 'FURY'.

Code 15. Timed at: 10:06

- Withdraw from Church troop carrier. 'Marne' in difficulties. Have been boarded by Church elite. Proceed to 'Marne' and implement second boarding party.

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – 'FURY' to 'MARNE'.

CODE 6. Timed at: 10:22.

- *Align vessel to 144.9. We are approaching from third vector. Will attempt to board stern section of troop carrier to disable drive and life support. Acknowledge.*

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – ‘MARNE’ to ‘FURY’.

CODE 6. Timed at: 10:29.

- *Acknowledged ‘Fury’. Realignment of vessel commencing. We have been boarded by Church Elite. Lower sections of ship, including auxiliary hold, lost. Drive units protected.*

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – ‘TRIUMPH’ to ‘IMPERIAL PRIDE’.

Code 0. Timed at: 10:59.

- *Ship boarded. Church troops have reached drive section. Heavy casualties. Preparing bridge crew escape vessels.*

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – ‘IMPERIAL PRIDE’ all vessels.

Code 0. Timed at: 11:07.

- *Sensor readings detect hydron leak on ‘Triumph’. Detonation within 0.2 degrees.*

IMPERIAL SHIP-TO-SHIP COMMUNIQUÉ – ‘IMPERIAL PRIDE’ to all vessels.

Code 0. Timed at: 11:10.

- *Cruiser ‘Triumph’ and Church troop vessel destroyed. Level 1 shock wave detected.*

The wave resulting from the destruction of the *Triumph* rocked the *Castillio*. The once Cardinal, now Pope, Czieszko I, found himself flung across the bridge for a second time.

The first was when Antonio's yacht, *Imperial Pride*, had hammered into their hull, riveting a boarding tube into the flagship's gaping docking hatch.

‘Seal off all lower decks!’ Czieszko ordered.

‘There are still anti-men on board,’ reminded the ship’s captain.

‘Never mind that,’ said Czieszko. ‘The imperial troops must not take the bridge. Our safety is paramount.’

The docking tubes hissed like snakes as they channelled sealant and oxygen through the boarding hatch into the breach where the *Imperial Pride* had fastened itself.

Expecting a full defensive barricade, the squad snapped their shields together and advanced in a phalanx.

Trooper Brachiano, private in the 3rd Imperial Marines, flexed his hand. His cutlass was heavy in his palm and the sparse atmosphere made him sweat. The vanguard party was always the most dangerous place to be.

Like the others in his squad, he was prepared for a fight. This was their chance to seize the Tower for all time, to make history. Or so his captain had said. To be honest, he didn’t really much care why they were doing it, he just wanted it over and to be still alive at the end of the day.

‘Squad, forward!’ yelled the serjeant. The phalanx shuffled across the flexible tubing and into the enemy vessel. Brachiano couldn’t see anything but the metal floor plates, his helmet and the shield he was holding over his head cutting off all other vision.

He waited for the firing to start. There wasn’t much gunfire in shipboard conflict, not enough room or cover. Normally, a few volleys would be enough to discover whether the invading party had the courage to get a foothold; then it was nothing but muscle, steel and blood. Brachiano had been involved in three such battles: two which had ended in corridor skirmishes and a third where the formations had stayed intact and pushed shields against each other for two hours before dissolving into a gigantic free-for-all.

This one was neither.

‘Lower shields!’ ordered the serjeant. Instantly, the phalanx responded.

There was no one here.

‘What’s going on?’ Brachiano remarked. The corridor leading into the main decks was empty. Completely empty.

‘Must have all been sucked out,’ said one of the corporals. ‘The hull breach.’

‘Redeploy,’ said the serjeant. ‘I want two details at point. Find out what’s going on.’

Brachiano and his partner Josten were Detail Two. They split from the ranks and advanced up the corridor. The armour they were wearing made it impossible to keep quiet. Instinct kept them slow and cautious. Brachiano was more than aware of the hundred or so marines waiting impatiently in the small ship behind him and that whatever happened, it would happen to him first.

They turned the corner and headed left, swords ready. Detail One moved right. He heard their boots sounding on the deck floor.

‘What the hell?’ said Josten slowly.

The corridor on Deck Eighteen was littered with bodies. And bits of bodies. And mummified bodies.

‘Admiral, we are approaching the Tower.’

Oporto turned in his chair to his comms op. ‘How are we doing?’

‘Church troops are falling back, Admiral. The Fury has docked and is attempting to gain access to their drive engines. We have regained control of the auxiliary decks.’

‘Excellent. Best speed to the Tower. That must remain our primary objective.’

He stared out of his main viewer with its panorama of the Energy Tower. It looked so serene just sitting there in space. Only the occasional debris from the wreck of the *Triumph* and the Church troop carrier spinning past hinted at the battle raging in its name. As Oporto pondered upon his first sight of *Torre del Oro*, he realised how much he hated it. What a waste. To consider the amount of blood spilt in its name over the years. How much more they could have done. And now he was to take it for the empire. More fighting. When would it all stop?

The *Marne* shuddered as a tremendous explosion ripped through its lower decks. The bridge heaved as its artificial gravity struggled to compensate. ‘Mines,’ said his Number One confidently. ‘Which means they’re leaving.’

‘Hmm. Send my compliments to Captain Duke Alsemero on the *Fury*. It seems they’ve done their job. Close relevant hatches and get me to that Tower.’

General Plantanes, High Knight of the Order of Paladins, had led his men personally in for the charge on the *Marne*.

After docking, the Knights, with him at their head, had carved their way through the lower decks. They fought their way slowly towards the engineering sections at the rear of the gigantic warship. Once again, Plantanes's armour was stained red with blood. His helmet was ripped from his head. He stood hacking atop a pile of imperial bodies, bellowing at his soldiers to kill and keep going, all civilised musings long forgotten.

Clear vision was impossible; the corridor was full of smoke and rich with the ripe stench of bizarrely angled bodies. The knights crushed their way through the defending warriors, jamming open emergency hatches with bones and armour. They were unstoppable.

Until word reached them that their own ship had been breached; that it had been boarded.

Plantanes was preparing an attack on the first of the heavily defended engineering sections when a squire approached him with orders to retreat.

'Retreat?' he yelled, 'Never! We are Paladins!'

A great roar came up from his men. Shoving the squire out of the way, Plantanes leapt up. He was a giant, war personified, caked in his steaming, bloody armour. 'If they have our ship, we will take theirs!' He held his sword aloft.

A sniper, cowering behind a barricade, saw him rise up. So he shot the High Knight through the head.

All around the Energy Tower the mighty battle raged. The wrecks of the *Triumph* and the troopship were welded together, a spinning, billowing mesh of metal. The space around them was filled with debris: girders, ceilings, energy pipes.

As the locked ships plunged into the planetary atmosphere that anchored the Tower, two smaller craft darted round them, exchanging ancient missile fire. Blossoms of flame erupted on their hulls as they fought like wasps through the falling wreckage.

The *Marne*, that huge bloated warship, was hauling itself closer to the thin needle over which the two halves of the mighty empire battled. The *Fury* and the second Church troop carrier were clamped to its mighty flanks like parasites; tubes and grappling lines embedding themselves deep into its metal flesh.

In the distance was the drifting *Castillio*, itself possessed of a parasite: Antonio's vessel *Imperial Pride*. The Church flagship groaned and shook as the engineers attempted to stabilise its failing engines, while fighting off the remaining anti-men locked within.

Inside the ships of the two armadas, a million men swarmed like warring ants. The decks rang with the clash of steel and the screams of the dying. All seemed driven, possessed even, by the spirit of *Torre del Oro*, the monstrosity the Morestrans had spent two thousand years bringing to life. They fought bitterly, without mercy, knowing only that the Tower was theirs, had always been theirs, and they would do anything to keep it.

As for the Tower itself, it had become rotten. Its empty corridors and miles of tunnels glowed dully with a substance that should never have been brought to it. The only sounds were the ringing howls of its real owners: the thousands of anti-men that had once been a crew. If the Energy Tower lived, then it was a monster, a monster born out of Morestran blood.

Three survivors. That was all. Three. Apart from Nyssa, of course, who didn't count.

Ferdinand had the shaken crew of the shuttle taken to the brig. They didn't care. They were still alive.

'I want to know your destination. I want to know exactly where you were going.' Ferdinand paced the cell, ironically back in his old job again, questioning the shuttle captain.

'You know where we were going. To Minor. With our cargo.'

'Why?' Ferdinand shot a puzzled look at Mantrus, who gave as near a shrug as his old bones would allow.

The shuttle captain was tough – Fall had trained him well. He said nothing.

'Well, let's begin with what you were going to do with your... your cargo when you got there.'

The captain feigned relaxation. He was an ugly, pockmarked man. Ferdinand guessed he would be someone who enjoyed his job.

'What we always do. Did. Drop them off then get the hell out of there.'

'For what reason?'

'I don't know.'

Mantrus leaned forward, never taking a beady eye off the captain. 'He's lying. I can make him tell the truth. I have ways...'

'No. He's not lying. Why should he? You know Fall. Compartmentalisation. He wouldn't tell this man any more than he needed to know.'

Ferdinand turned back to the captain. 'We're going there. Anything else you might want to tell me?'

The captain and Mantrus blanched. 'My Lord...' stuttered the old man. 'Our trials are over. There is no –'

'You're out of your mind if you want to go there,' said the captain softly. 'Out of your mind.'

The Morestran surgery looked more like a torture chamber than a place of healing, thought Tegan. She observed the variety of clumsy instruments hanging from what to her looked like meat hooks. It was clear that medicine was yet another of the areas of technology the Church had put a block on.

It had taken a great deal of talking to persuade Ferdinand to allow Nyssa on to the ship. Now she was here, Tegan was less sure. Looking at that snarling creature chained to the operating table, Tegan wondered whether anything could be done. What on earth could bring Nyssa back to herself? Nothing remained of her companion. Nothing recognisable anyway.

The Apothecary in his long white robes approached the creature with extreme caution. Even half-conscious from heavy sedation, which had allowed the crew to cut her out of the spacesuit, Nyssa remained aggressive. Her talons worked away at the manacles on her wrists, savagely attempting to free herself. Her normally gentle face was twisted with hate, her mouth salivating with her newly developed biting teeth. And all the time she moaned, as if some animal had got inside her and was howling for release.

'There must be something you can do,' said Tegan, realising she was close to tears.

The Apothecary, a young man whom Tegan had heard called Brodski, shook his head. He was clean-shaven with a head to match. He certainly didn't look anything like a doctor.

'I don't know. Look here –' he indicated a thick scar across Nyssa's warped stomach. 'Something's been implanted. Probably this anti-matter. I don't know how to get it out even

if I wanted to. The operation would probably kill her. Which may not be a bad thing. To be honest, my best suggestion would be to shove her out of the airlock. The gods only know how contagious she could be.'

Tegan thought about shouting at him, then realised he was just frightened. What was Nyssa to him except a demented monster? She contented herself with, 'Some doctor you are. She happens to be my friend.'

Brodski shrugged. 'What would you like me to do?'

He had a point. Tegan looked pityingly at the mewling creature. She wished the Doctor were here. 'I don't know,' she said quietly.

There was a bleep from the console. The Doctor looked up, the pressure continuing to build inside his head. The TARDIS began to vibrate harder, like his ship had changed gear.

'What's happening?' asked Fall, still chained to the wall, his suit torn and bloody. The Doctor saw the old glint in his eye. Kristyan Fall was himself again. He certainly was a remarkable man.

Glancing at the controls, he saw what had happened. 'Time compensators. Good girl.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'We're moving forward in time. I typed in a randomisation program earlier. We have some leeway within our present corridor. I'm hoping to get there when Tegan arrives, if she does. It's a long journey by conventional methods.'

'How do you know when she will get there?'

'I don't. But the TARDIS is rather good at making instinctive guesses. Still, it's a risk.'

'What do you mean?' Fall was looking more than a little confused.

'We're three months after we left the Energy Tower. Now, when we were there that anti-matter was extremely unstable. By the time we arrive, who knows, it might already have achieved critical mass.'

AUTOMATIC SHIP SYSTEM LOG 00:36 24.05.99.

- POWER DRAIN DETECTED IN ALL MAJOR SYSTEMS. UNABLE TO COMPUTE SOURCE.
- E.T.A. ZETA MINOR .15 DEGREES

- LOW LEVEL SENSOR SURVEY AVAILABLE ONLY: ENERGY SWEEP DETECTS PRIMARY POWER SOURCE (TYPE UNKNOWN) CO-ORDINATES 04.77.52 EQUATORIAL LATITUDE.
- SECONDARY POWER SOURCE (MORESTRAN STANDARD EMITTERS), SAME CO-ORDINATES.
- LANDING CO-ORDINATES ENTERED. TRANSFERENCE SYSTEMS INOPERATIVE.

AUTOMATIC SHIP SYSTEM LOG 00:37 24.05.99.

- POWER DRAIN INCREASE 22%.
- E.T.A. ZETA MINOR. 14 DEGREES.

Ferdinand locked himself into the safety supports of his chair. He released the key and pressed it into his palm. They were skimming the atmosphere of the fabled Planet of Evil. He looked around and received a sharp reminder that he was on board a Church ship. The bridge crew, similarly locked down, were praying. This planet must literally put the fear of God into them.

The Arch-Cardinal's ship shook with the sudden resistance of atmosphere. Ferdinand closed his eyes. He felt like praying himself. He had a horrible vision of the Evil Ones, the ones the Church drew in picture books to frighten children, reaching up at him, black arms outstretched and those hideous bug eyes staring.

The ship lurched and he saw the main viewer clear. They were screaming down to the planet's surface, air brakes desperately cutting in trying to slow their descent.

The surface was a blur, just a shuddering mass of purple and red. Then, as the ship slowed, he saw a bare, black patch; a hole in the colour. They were heading straight for it.

'Stay on station!' he barked at his crew, jerking them out of their meditations. 'Give me some data!'

Instantly, he was inundated with a chorus of replies.

'E.T.A. twelve seconds!' 'Co-ordinates locked and plotted!' 'Landing struts releasing! Buffers engaged!'

The ship righted itself, their depleted sensors analysing and matching gravity readings. Abruptly, their speed dropped and Ferdinand felt the sleek catamaran touch ground.

There was a moment of silence on the bridge.

The main viewer pulsed into action and he saw his first view of Zeta Minor.

‘Well, here we are,’ Ferdinand whispered. ‘The last planet in the known universe.’

‘What is this...’ someone muttered.

The Zeta Project must have cleared the jungle. Razed it. There was nothing to see but a flat plain broken only by the burnt stumps of what must have once been trees.

‘Rotate oculoid sensors,’ Ferdinand ordered.

The view changed, panning around the ship. At last something broke the flat relief: metal cranes, a trundling mechanical conveyer belt emerging noisily from the ground. It was bringing up tons of soil in its hundreds of moving buckets and dumping them in a huge mound. The mining operation.

The cameras moved on, past the automated, unceasing machinery round to nothing. Black nothing.

No, that couldn’t be nothing. Ferdinand looked closer. The blackness was huge, stretching away into the distance. It seemed to shift, to move in the strange light.

‘What is that?’ said Cardinal Mantrus, seated at Ferdinand’s left. ‘Is that... water?’

It appeared they had landed at the edge of a vast black lake.

As soon as Tegan’s feet touched the surface of Zeta Minor she knew the planet was alive. She was standing on a living creature.

The landing party alighted around her and she peered through her newly fitted helmet up to the sky.

It was as if reality had had great rents torn in it. Red streaks visibly grew and contracted high in the atmosphere, like something breathing. And it was warm. Uncomfortably warm. She decided not to look at the sky any more.

She felt incredibly exposed as the expedition filed out into the mining area. On one side lay the burnt plain, so flat that its furthest angles seemed distorted to the eye. On the other, the water so black and thick and sluggish that nothing, not even Zeta Minor’s mad light, reflected in it. Tegan clasped her automatic rifle more tightly. Its heavy presence made her feel a little better.

The air was completely still. They were at the edge of a lake. Shouldn’t there be some wind?

The only sound came from the relentless chugging of the mining operation. The twenty-odd men in the landing party fanned out round the ungainly Morestran machinery.

‘Set charges on that digging equipment,’ Ferdinand ordered. He turned to Tegan. He had removed his spectacles but his face remained obscured by his ornate visor, its metal gleaming in the daylight. ‘You asked me where it ends,’ he said sharply. ‘Here. This is the only place.’

‘This is hell,’ replied Tegan.

‘Sir!’ shouted one of the troopers. He was gesticulating towards a lump in the ground heading out to the plain. Shouldering his rifle, Ferdinand jogged over to him. Tegan decided to follow.

The trooper was pointing to one of the tree stumps. ‘What is it?’ asked Ferdinand.

‘It’s a tree stump,’ said Tegan acidly. She had been frightened out of her wits.

‘I think it’s a body.’

Tegan looked down. It was a body. In fact, they were all bodies. Charred, nothing but skeletons but undoubtedly bodies.

Ferdinand was staring out at the plain. Perhaps he was counting just how many tree stumps there were. Tegan felt the anger emanating from him, like a wave. ‘Blow it up. Blow this place to pieces.’

‘You heard what he said!’ yelled Tegan. ‘Get those bombs set!’ She touched Ferdinand’s shoulder. ‘Let this be the end of it.’

Ferdinand was impassive, his eyes unreadable beneath the helmet. For some reason, Tegan thought of Nyssa, still chained up in the surgery.

Within minutes, the job of laying the explosives was complete. The troops began to backtrack to the ship, trailing wires in their wake. Tegan stood on the landing gantry, glad to feel metal beneath her boots. She was looking out to the distance, across the plain. The planet seemed to her expectant, waiting for them to make a mistake. The stagnant air contributed to the tension.

‘We’re ready,’ said Ferdinand, helmet off now and looking more human. His voice was softer, reminding Tegan of the man he had been back at the court. ‘We destroy this damned place and then it’s over.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Tegan replied. ‘It’s not like the Doctor to miss the ending of anything.’

‘Come on,’ Ferdinand said and led her back inside.

The mine exploded with a dull crump. Its charge seemed anticlimactic, as if the planet had muffled its dramatic potential. The girders and pulleys collapsed inwards, shattering in the blast. A single ball of black smoke rolled upwards.

‘And that’s that,’ said Ferdinand, no triumph, just relief in his voice. ‘Prepare for take-off.’

‘Something on the sensors, sir,’ said Ingham, the comms officer.

‘Power drain increasing rapidly,’ said the engineer. ‘The hydron tanks are draining away.’

‘How can that be? Take off. Now!’ snapped Mantrus.

‘Movement,’ said Ingham. ‘On the plain.’

Tegan stared into the main viewer.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Ferdinand irritably.

‘I think we’ve woken something up,’ said Tegan, suddenly feeling very, very sick.

As if from nowhere, swarms of humanoid figures were rising up. Countless limbs thrashed around, staggering, gibbering, almost dancing. They were coming closer.

‘Anti-men,’ said Tegan. ‘Thousands of them. Coming right for us. Listen. Listen, everyone.’

They didn’t need exterior speakers to hear the excited roar coming off the plain.

In the ensuing panic, no one bothered to rotate the oculoid sensors to where they detected movement. Consequently no one witnessed the TARDIS appear right next to the lake.

Chapter Fifteen

As soon as the TARDIS materialised, the Doctor felt something like a sheet of black boiling lead pour into his mind and he found himself tumbling to the floor. Wave after wave poured into him until he felt so full he thought he would burst. He reached a shaking hand up to the console. His limbs were too heavy, full of the black stuff pumping into him. He found himself yelling in pain. So much pressure. Must make contact... too much for him...

'Doctor!' came a voice from the darkness. He tried to marshal his mind. Fall. It had to be. Fall had to help him. There was no other way.

He forced his preternaturally heavy eyelids open and saw the Zero Man struggling wildly in the shackles. 'Help... me.'

The Doctor couldn't tell whether his voice was normal or not. He had to risk it. If he had enough energy left.

'Come on, Doctor,' said Fall firmly. 'Unlock these chains.'

The Doctor had to make himself move. He felt himself pressing into the floor, felt as if his body was leaving a dent like a slug's trail in his wake. His head was being dragged down. He couldn't keep his eyes open. Black shapes swam across his closed vision. Fall's voice became distant. Far away. Another universe.

At last: sensation. Cold molecular bonded alloy. The shackles. Instinctively, for instinct was all he had left, he activated the release. Easy if you knew how. As the pressure on him increased even more, he vaguely wondered what his next regeneration would look like when it inevitably triggered itself in the next few minutes. And whether the pressure would cease when it did.

Someone was lifting him, carrying him. How? He was so heavy. There was the hum of the door and then it was all blinding light and roaring.

He heard running and shouting. No air. The pressure easing, slightly at first, then a lot. He could lift his head again. He was here. Back on Zeta Minor.

'Doctor!' he heard from a welcoming, Australian voice.

Ferdinand had ordered the shattered digging equipment hauled to the ship's entrance and piled up as a last-stand barricade. The ruins themselves they would use as a buffer until the time came to fall back. All were considerably motivated by the sight of that raging army charging across the plain. It was too late to start asking questions as to whether it was the destruction of the mine that had triggered their attack. They had perhaps two minutes before they were engulfed. While the engineers worked frantically at finding the cause of the hydron drain, the landing party prepared for the onslaught.

Tegan was dragging a twisted piece of the conveyer equipment back to the ship when she glanced over to the lake and saw the TARDIS. Her surprise was compounded when she saw a filthy Kristyan Fall emerge from the blue box carrying what looked like a dead Doctor in his arms.

'Doctor!' she shouted in disbelief, dropping the wreckage and running over to him.

He opened his eyes and smiled. 'Hello, Tegan. Not too late, am I?'

There! The other side. Where time and space are one; beyond what the Morestrans called the gate, the place where the Dark Gods dwell.

The movement had almost slowed to nothing. When it stopped, when reality became real, it would be the end. Impossible to translate, this place was chaos. And now order was establishing itself. Time was forming and the many that were one, the dancing ones, were separating, becoming temporal.

It no longer saw the bright place clearly. The One-Who-Had-Crossed was close. Now, Time was present and it no longer saw all.

It had known of this and planted a seed in the mind of the One-Who-Had-Crossed. And he had come.

The pain caused by the bright place was overwhelming them. Great fragments were splitting off, solidifying. It no longer had all. The One-Who-Had-Crossed must act.

Using the last of its holistic energy, it sent the Opener of the Way out to the bright place. The formless creature that had once been part of the whole suffered burning agonies as it returned to the Well of Light, that gateway to the mad, still place.

Towards the light. The Opener of the Way, taking shape from the chaos of colours, becoming corporeal, blinded by the light and screaming in the agonies of birth.

It now had Time.

The army of monsters was almost on them. Ferdinand found he had no pity left, just hatred, just blind hatred. He wanted to kill them all.

His men deployed round the mine works were dwarfed by the size of the approaching mob. They were ashen and sweating inside their armour.

‘Get your men back inside the ship. You must take off.’ The Doctor had freed himself from Kristyan Fall and was eyeing the black water. Something about it seemed to be energising him Ferdinand was incredibly suspicious. How come they were now such good friends?

‘We stay and fight until every last one of those things is lying in pieces.’

The Doctor looked at him. ‘I don’t think you understand, Ferdinand. There’s over eight thousand anti-men on this planet, and they’re all converging here. If you don’t believe me, look!’ He raised an expansive arm theatrically out to the charging mass.

‘The Zeta Project must be wiped from memory.’ Ferdinand glared at Kristyan Fall.

‘You haven’t got a chance,’ insisted the Doctor. ‘Getting your men killed isn’t going to help anyone.’

‘No?’

‘Ferdinand! Listen to him!’ Tegan shouted. Something in her voice at last reached the man inside the armour. She was frightened. His mind seemed to clear a little.

‘Ferdinand,’ the Doctor’s voice was calm. ‘Get your men inside the ship and take off.’

He was staring right into Ferdinand’s eyes. Something about them, their blueness, it was... soothing.

‘We can’t,’ he said.

‘Why not?’

‘Something’s draining the ship’s power,’ said Tegan. She was holding her rifle on the casual figure of Kristyan Fall, who stood with his hands on his head.

‘What? There’s no reason...’

‘I suggest we continue this discussion elsewhere,’ said the Zero Man drily. He inclined his head towards the onslaught.

'Nobody asked you anything,' snapped Tegan.

'Just an idea.'

'He's right,' said the Doctor. 'Quickly now.'

Ferdinand considered his choices. The Doctor was looking at him, waiting for a decision. He felt like he was losing the ability to make such decisions, that he was in the hands of a higher power. He had to remember who he was. He heard the discordant song of the anti-men. At last, he said, 'Very well.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Good man.'

They split and ran. Ferdinand went over to his men. Already, the howling was deafening and the first few shots were blasting out into the mass. He saw with some dismay how little effect the bullets were having. 'Withdraw!' he yelled. 'Covering fire!'

As his men raced past him, Ferdinand turned to the ocean of anti-men, some already climbing the mining wreckage. He thought of the people these creatures would once have been. How the Zeta Project had destroyed them, all in the name of the Tower. And once again the white fury came back, the desperate need for revenge on the Church, the Tower, on everything.

He fired off a clip of bullets, hearing himself screaming wildly, 'I'll come back! I'll come back! All of you!' His weapon turned hot in his gauntleted hand. He barely noticed the serjeant hauling him away. The anti-men, thin and lean in their patient's smocks, were crazed, insane with anger. They were clambering desperately towards their prey.

Firing until his gun was empty, Ferdinand backtracked to the ship. He no longer cared how much effect his bullets were having. His serjeant was practically dragging him out of the fight.

Not until he was inside the hatch did he come to his senses. He dropped his burning rifle to the deck floor, tearing his helmet off, gulping in air.

'My Lord?' asked the serjeant.

'What?' he bellowed.

'Are you all right?'

Ferdinand smiled grimly. 'Just get the men guarding the ship's access points. Kill as many of those creatures as you can.'

The serjeant, his calm demeanour belying obvious uncertainty, gave him an uneasy glance, nodded and jogged away.

Ferdinand's attention was caught by the banging on the outer hatch. It sounded like a thousand fists trying to smash their way in. He ran to the door and pressed his ear up against it. The bangs and the roaring were deafening, echoing the noise in his mind. 'In the name of the gods,' Ferdinand whispered, 'what have I become?'

When they reached the bridge, Mantrus was practically transfixed with panic. 'They're climbing over the ship! What are we going to do?'

Tegan kept an aim on Kristyan Fall. Even in his dishevelled state, she didn't trust him an inch. The Doctor headed straight for the main viewer. Anti-men were all over the oculoid cameras, their hands and faces rendered more grotesque by the warping close-ups. 'We have to take off, immediately.'

Mantrus eyed him suspiciously. 'Where's Ferdinand? Who are you?'

As Tegan took in the details of the bridge with its shocked crew she was too slow to prevent Fall suddenly pulling her gun out of her hands. He strode up to Mantrus. 'You know who I am.'

Mantrus, if possible, went even paler. He nodded, unable to speak.

'Do what the Doctor orders.'

'Bu-but, there's no power.'

'Then find some.'

The Doctor ran to the engineering station. 'What's the power status?'

The officer was trembling, transfixed by the scene on the viewer. 'Come on! We haven't any time.'

'Nothing left. Barely enough to get us off the ground.'

'It doesn't make sense. Why a power drain? It can't be a matter of contamination.' Tegan felt herself under sudden scrutiny. 'There isn't any anti-matter on board now is there?'

'Nyssa,' she replied.

'What? She's here? What did she find out at the Academy? Come on. This is terribly important.'

'I don't know. She's changed, into one of them.' She pointed a thumb at the main viewer.

'She's in the medical bay, but what...'

Tegan was shocked into silence by the Doctor's reaction. He clapped the cowering engineering officer on the back. 'Excellent! Come on!'

'Excuse me, Doctor,' said Kristyan Fall. 'Would you like to tell me what you're planning?'

'No time,' came the breathless reply. 'Just get us off the ground. Use your emergency hatches. Seal off each section. But leave me a route to the... where did you say it was... medical facility. Tegan, come with me.'

'Are you just going to let him order us around?' roared Mantrus to Fall. 'Just who in the name of the gods do you think you are?'

The Doctor stopped, halfway out of the door. Tegan, for the first time in what felt like ages, concealed a smile. 'I'm the Doctor.' And they rushed out.

The last words Tegan caught were between Mantrus and Fall.

'The... Doctor?' asked the old Cardinal.

'*Il Dottore*,' came the reply. 'He's back.'

'Cargo Bay to Command Area. The creatures are climbing through the landing struts. They're tearing away the sub-frame. Have positioned four flame-units in the access areas. Estimate penetration one minute.'

'Solarium to Command Area. Hull hatches breached. They were just throwing themselves at the doors. Reinforcements needed immediately. Repeat: enemy is inside the ship.'

'Drive section to Command Area. Guards posted. Enemy spotted entering hydron ducts. Energy drain undiagnosed Auxiliary power only.'

'Main airlock to Command Area! Emergency! Enemy has broken through secondary blockade. Two men down. Regrouping in deck access area B. Enemy contained but ammunition low. Send help!'

'Command Area to Medical section! Command Area to Medical Section! Make contact! Make contact!'

The ship rang with the sounds of firing and bellowing. Tegan hurried along after the Doctor, divesting herself of her armour as she ran. What good was it going to be against anti-men?

‘Doctor, I would like to know what’s going on.’

He stopped rushing and put his finger to his lips. Tegan heard footsteps and jumped as three grim-set Church soldiers began pelting down the corridor past them in the opposite direction.

‘Nyssa must be the reason there’s the energy drain.’

‘Nyssa?’

The Doctor grabbed her arm. He began hauling her along the corridor. ‘Is it this way?’

She nodded, pulling herself free from his grip. He talked as they ran.

‘It’s no accident we’ve come here at this time. They knew. I was so stupid, I couldn’t see what was happening to my mind. The creatures in the anti-matter universe, if you can call whatever lives there a creature, or even if it lives... can you call that life?’

‘Doctor, you’re rambling.’

‘They knew we would come here. Their perception of Time is different from ours. They knew this ship would land. Did Nyssa tell you anything about what she found out at the Sorenson Academy? Anything?’

‘She was already changed when we found her.’

They were entering the medical section. The lights were out here. Only a few red emergency bulbs glowed weakly from the walls. Something to do with the power drain. At least Tegan hoped that was the reason for it.

‘What are you talking about? And what’s Nyssa got to do with it?’

‘Don’t you see, she must have something, some knowledge that they need...’

The Doctor stopped. He was looking around. Tegan wondered what he was doing and then she saw it. The table that Nyssa had been strapped to was empty. No Nyssa. Tegan saw something lying in the corner and realised that it was an Apothecary’s habit. With something tiny and dry inside it.

‘I think Nyssa’s gone for a little walk,’ said the Doctor.

‘You mean she...’ Tegan looked down at the body.

‘It wasn’t her fault. The anti-matter has hybridised her cell structure. She isn’t Nyssa. I’d better find her.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Get back to the bridge. Tell Fall to clear a path from the medical bay to the nearest exterior hatch. When the ship takes off, it must hover over the black pool. Although it’s more like a black lake now.’

‘I’d noticed. Doctor –’

The Doctor frantically clasped her hand. ‘Not now, Tegan. There isn’t time. Please, do as I ask. It’s the only way.’

She looked at him. Once, she wouldn’t have trusted his motives. Would have put up a fight. But since the death of Adric... ‘All right.’

The Doctor released her hand. ‘Be careful, Tegan.’

There was a sudden noise and the ship began to shudder. Tegan felt the gravity shift. They were rising into the air.

‘Fall’s got the engines on-line,’ said the Doctor. ‘He has to take off. Just get us over the black lake. Leave the rest to me. If I’m right, you’ll be able to reach orbit once Nyssa’s off the ship.’

‘Doctor –’

‘Just go!’

There was a mighty bang from the rear of the ship and Tegan felt a jolt of impact.

‘We’re too heavy,’ whispered the Doctor.

The intercom unit on the wall crackled. ‘Doctor,’ came Fall’s voice. ‘Anti-men are all over the outer hull. Hundreds of them. They’re weighing us down. We don’t have the power to lift off.’

The Doctor leaned against the operating table. ‘We haven’t got time for this. Tegan, get back to the bridge. Tell Fall to try and use the force-field equipment on the hull. It might shift some of the anti-men. We have to get airborne.’

Realising that the Doctor was working to some kind of timetable, Tegan just nodded and sprinted away. As she dodged through more troopers, these wounded and bleeding, she wondered what had happened to Ferdinand.

As soon as he heard Kristyan Fall’s voice on the intercom, Ferdinand knew what was left to do.

He made his way through the decks, using his security key to unlock the emergency shutters. Occasionally he heard the rattling of gunfire but didn’t stop to find out who was winning the war. Just once, he ran into a single anti-man. The creature was hunched over the rapidly drying body of a

trooper, worrying it with its claws. Ferdinand fired once, hitting it in the back of the head. It turned and Ferdinand gave it the rest of the clip. It staggered and fell, almost in pieces. Without looking down, Ferdinand marched over its body.

The armoury was unlocked, the security door hanging open. Hardly any weaponry was left inside. Ferdinand threw down his gun and began opening lockers.

He had told Tegan that he would end it here and he was going to be as good as his word. He hauled the small packs marked *Blasting Charges – extreme caution* out from their containers and laid them out on the floor. Then he rummaged around for something to strap them on with.

He thought about his sister, about his time with the SIS, about all the Church had done. The monstrosities he had seen. The terrible deeds he himself had performed. He could no longer see a difference between any of them.

He strapped on the charges and reloaded his rifle. Then he left the armoury and started off towards the roof hatches.

The temperature on the bridge had risen considerably by the time Tegan made it back.

'We've lost the lower deck,' Ingham was saying as she walked in. The engines were screaming. A babble of voices shouting for help spilled from the intercom.

'Power down to 0.5 per cent capacity. Hydron engines are overheating. We can't take off,' stated the engineering officer.

'Switch main viewer to the top of the ship,' ordered Kristyan Fall.

The picture changed to reveal countless roaring anti-men hammering away at the hull. They were bunched so close together it was impossible to see past them.

'All right,' Fall sighed. 'We're going to have to go up on the hull and shoot them off.'

'Why bother?' asked Mantrus, slumped in the captain's seat. 'We're dead. Can't you see that?'

'We've got to keep trying,' insisted Tegan. 'The Doctor's got a plan. All we have to do is get the ship over that lake.'

'All?' snorted Mantrus. 'We can't even get off the ground.'

'One more word out of you, Mantrus,' said Fall evenly, 'and I'll kill you myself.' Sweat was pouring from his ruined suit. 'I'm going up there. Get some men to the roof hatches. I'll need some flame units.'

'The Doctor said something about using the force-field units to electrify the hull.'

'Sir! Look!' said Inghain.

Tegan turned to the main viewer to see the swarm clearing. There was a flash and the camera shook as an explosion boomed high above them. A circle of smoke emerged from an open hatch. Gunfire. The anti-men backing away.

'Who is that?' asked Fall.

As they watched, a figure emerged from the cleared space. The figure seemed deformed, unusually stout.

'Ferdinand,' whispered Tegan.

The little man blazed away at the ring of anti-men around him. He was yelling at them, soundless in the image from the camera. The creatures regrouped, then began to surge towards him Ferdinand dropped his rifle to the ground. Smoke drifted from its muzzle.

'Help him,' said Tegan. 'Help him!'

'How?' sneered Mantrus.

Their last view of Ferdinand was of him reaching for something at his bulky chest. The anti-men were on him.

Light. A bright blinding flash of light and the Church ship rocked with the blast. Equipment and crew were thrown to the floor. The picture on the viewer dissolved into waves of static. Tegan hit her head on a handrail as she rolled to the deck.

She thought it was the blow but realised seconds later that the reason she felt sick was because they had taken off. The hysterical shriek from the ship's engines calmed and they lurched again, this time upwards as the vessel lifted from the ground.

'He did it,' said Fall, leaping to his feet.

'Lifting off, minimal capacity. The roof of the ship has... has gone.'

'How badly damaged?' asked Fall.

The engineering officer stared at his instruments in disbelief. 'It's gone. He must have used the heavy blasting charges.'

Tegan tried to remember her last words to Ferdinand. How could he have done what he had done? The engines were grinding. She wondered what the blast had done to them.

'Switch to main viewer. Take us over that lake,' ordered Fall. He looked at Tegan. 'I just hope this is worth it.'

The view changed again, from static to the underside of the ship. As it gained height, the anti-men were falling away. Desperately, savagely, they gripped the landing struts, trying to hold on. Others, less fortunate, were scrabbling at the smooth hull as they dropped back to Zeta Minor.

'We've got nothing more than a hover,' said the engineering officer. 'Hull integrity is too badly damaged. We can't achieve orbit.'

'All right, Doctor,' said Kristyan Fall. 'It's up to you.'

The Doctor felt the explosion on the roof rock the ship. Rather a drastic way to solve the weight problem. Probably didn't do hull integrity much good either.

Still, they were in the air, for now. He detected a stuttering in the hydron pitch of the engines. If he didn't find Nyssa soon, they were going to have real problems on their hands.

He had followed what he thought was her trail out towards the rear of the ship. Good. If he could reach her.

She was snarling against the emergency escape hatch, battering at it, trying to get it open. The chains from the operating table still hung from her wrist. He could only see the back of her head but noticed sadly how long her hair had been forced to grow.

The creature turned and the Doctor saw just how altered she had become. She was unrecognisable, her face a mask of hate, her eyes red glowing discs. Difficult to believe that beneath all that cultured Trakenite DNA, the primordial beast still thrived so strongly.

He waited for her to attack. She grunted at him, flexing her talons. Sometimes, he wished he wasn't so impulsive. It was all very well rushing in to get the job done, but it would probably have been a good idea to have formed some sort of plan for leading Nyssa out.

The problem was that she was between him and the hatch lock. Unless he led her away from where he wanted to be, he wasn't going to be able to do this.

He remembered Kristyan Fall's struggles in the TARDIS. 'Nyssa, Nyssa. Listen, you're in there, I know you are.' The creature growled. 'This isn't you. You are a scientist. You are civilised. Remember Traken.'

Perhaps his words were having an effect. Nyssa halted, as if pondering his statements.

The Doctor licked his lips. 'You can fight it. It doesn't have to be like this. You can fight the creature inside you. Listen to me. Fight!'

He felt like he was just getting there when suddenly over the intercom came Tegan's booming voice. 'Doctor! You've got to do it now! We're going to crash!'

The creature straightened up, the red glare back. It howled in triumph, ready to pounce. The Doctor leapt at her. He felt hot flesh, nails scratching at him. Most worryingly, as the beast howled in triumph, he felt his mind squeeze, as if icy hands had grasped it, plucking it from his body. His eyes widening in agony, the Doctor reached past the struggling Nyssa and yanked the hatch release. As the door fell way, the ship tilted over. The Doctor felt a rush of hot air, caught a last glimpse of a deep black nothing far below and then was plummeting away from the ship, Nyssa climbing all over him.

'Look!' Tegan yelled, as the oculoid on the main viewer caught the Doctor and Nyssa falling into the black lake.

The ship was righting itself as suddenly the engines screeched into life. 'Full power!' cried the engineering officer.

'We're saved!' yelled Mantrus, leaping out of his chair. 'Praise God!'

There was another bang and then they were out of control. 'Mis-phase! Engines at critical.'

'Land! Land!' shouted Fall, as they tilted again, the ship firing jagged bursts of power that sent them hurtling across the lake at full speed.

'Too late,' said Tegan as the opposite shore approached them far too rapidly.

'Brace for impact!' ordered Fall.

When does it end? thought Tegan, sandwiching herself into a little nook between two seats.

Then it was nothing but bangs, crashes and screaming.

She didn't know how long the noise in her head lasted. All she remembered was a hand pulling her free into hot light and the stench of burnt wiring.

At last, her vision cleared. The hand belonged to Kristyan Fall. As she sat dazed in the wreckage of the bridge she yanked herself free of his grasp. 'I can manage,' she said. 'Don't think I've forgotten what you did to me.'

Fall held out his palms as if to say 'Fair enough.'

Tegan felt hot, sticky blood on her face. Her vision was hazy and she wondered if she'd suffered concussion. There was a gaping rent in the main viewer and daylight poured in.

The bridge crew lay slumped at their posts.

'Mantrus is dead,' said Fall, nursing his damaged leg. 'Ceiling conduits fell right on top of him.'

Tegan looked to see nothing but ringed fingers stretching out from a mess of ducts and wiring.

She tried to stand. All around, survivors of the crash were picking their way through the ruins. Ingham was staggering round his shattered console, clutching his broken right arm.

'We'd better get moving,' said Fall as he picked up a rifle and expertly checked the clip.

Tegan groaned; all she wanted to do was sleep.

Fall cocked the rifle. 'Those things are still out there. We need to find cover.'

Tegan slowly regained her balance and hobbled over to the hole in the main viewer. Somehow, the ship had spun round as it crashed and she could see the placid lake. She climbed through the wreckage on to the buckled bow of the spaceship.

The anti-men were still chasing them, circling the lake, their energy apparently infinite. She knew she was dead. There was no fight left in her.

Fall climbed out after her. 'Right,' he stated simply.

'It's over, can't you see. There's nowhere left to go.'

The anti-men were already close. Within minutes they would overwhelm the survivors. Already Tegan could hear their mindless noise echoing out across the lake.

The lake.

Something was happening. A creature rose up from the black water. Huge in scale, its size filling her view.

Fall dropped to his knees. 'The Dark Gods...'

It reminded her of an insect. Perhaps. Glistening sightless eyes, black and red flickering bulk, just rising and rising.

It began to move towards the ruined ship.

Chapter Sixteen

Time had no meaning.

For a Time Lord: a dreadful irony.

Like before, his conscious mind was now part of something much larger.

Nyssa was near; although she was no longer strictly Nyssa. As best he could remember, he was floating in the blackness. He saw himself; as he was, the curly brown hair, the scarf, that nose. He recalled seeing himself in reverse, nothing more than a ghost. All times were one time.

And the other, the presence. And again, like the last time, they communicated.

The monster in the lake moved quickly. So quickly that Tegan almost thought it might be a film in which someone had snipped out frames.

It shouldn't have existed here. It wasn't supposed to be here. She felt breathless and tiny next to it; she felt its pull on her mind. It was cruel and smooth and utterly alien. Did it even know they were there?

It was moving towards the anti-men, the thousands of anti-men stretched out round the black lake.

As she and Fall sat on the hull and watched, it reached the boundaries of the black water and flowed over the roaring beasts. As it touched them, its great bulk shimmered in myriad colours, reminding Tegan of petrol refracting sunlight.

In its wake it left skeletons.

And still it was growing. It stretched up high into the sky like a great column of oily smoke, sweeping away anti-men. There was no sound but the sound of its movement: a kind of booming rattle. Nothing escaped.

'I just hope it remembers to stop when it gets to us,' remarked Kristyan Fall. Brought back to herself, Tegan heard the surviving crew members wailing as they witnessed the god amongst them.

The monster twisted and turned until it faced them. Not one anti-man remained.

It just stopped and looked down at them with its alien eyes.

'Well,' said Tegan, wondering why she felt so resigned. 'It's now or never.' She saw Fall raise his automatic rifle to fire. For some reason she found that funny. He never gave up, no matter what the odds.

The thing started to pulsate. It retracted itself, warping inside out through angles that made Tegan's mind ache, until at last it began to drop. Tegan thought she detected a hint of reluctance, as if the giant was a dog called away from a tempting bone by a cruel master.

Slowly, horribly slowly, its blank vision fixed on theirs, it sank back into the black lake.

All was quiet again. The air remained still and unpleasant.

Tegan thought about Ferdinand and why he had done what he had done.

He had been right, this place was the end. You couldn't go out any further. She thought about other days on other lakes. Yet another person she hadn't got to know.

And what about Kristyan Fall? He was responsible for all this carnage. He was the reason thousands of black skeletons ringed this lake like obscene jewellery. And yet, here he was, helping the Doctor, pulling her out of the wreckage. Everything was muddled up, blurred. She didn't know who she was herself any more. And what about the Doctor and Nyssa? Instinct told her they were dead, lost in the lake, but she was learning not to live purely by instinct.

'Come on,' said Fall. 'Let's see who's left.'

This time she allowed him to lift her up.

After the attack by the anti-men and the crash, there were twelve left from a crew of fifty. Fall instructed them to salvage whatever was useful and be prepared for a long wait.

Tegan had the impression that whatever it was in that lake had let them off once, but hanging around was not going to be a good idea.

It was just as they were constructing some old, dusty plastic survival domes when Tegan saw two figures pull themselves out of the lake right next to the ship. The red evening light was dying and night was coming in, sending the temperature alarmingly low.

'Doctor! Nyssa!' she shrieked, making the others jump.

Her two friends staggered towards her. She noticed that their clothes and hair were dry. Even better, Nyssa looked completely normal, if a little dazed. They embraced while Fall and the crew looked on.

'You're OK!' said Tegan joyfully. 'What happened in there?'

The Doctor gave her a wry smile. The lines that had been etched in his face since he first started having those visions had disappeared. He looked tired but free of whatever had been burdening him 'We... understood,' he replied cryptically.

'Then it's over? We can go?'

The Doctor appeared to examine the wreck of the ship. Nyssa held her hand, bright smile of relief on her face. 'Not quite. The Doctor made a promise.'

'I had to. I owed it to them.'

Tegan was puzzled. 'But weren't they the ones who tried to...to destroy your mind?'

'Not intentionally. They knew I would come back to the black lake. I have to stop the Energy Tower coming on-line.'

'How are we going to do that?' asked Tegan.

'I think it best if I explain it on the way. Now, I'm not normally happy about too many people in the TARDIS at once but unless I get these good people away from Zeta Minor, this whole thing could start up again. Those that live in the anti-universe aren't our friends and they have every right to be angry with the Morestrans.'

'But -'

'No buts. Come on.'

With that, the Doctor walked over to Kristyan Fall. 'Thank you for trusting me.'

Fall smirked. 'I'm not free of anti-matter myself. I can still feel it inside me. If I don't trust you then what chance have I got?'

'Why can't he...well, go jump in the lake?' suggested Tegan. 'It cured Nyssa.'

'I don't think it works like that, Tegan,' Nyssa answered. 'I was cured because I had something to give them in return. The Doctor gave his promise and I...'

'What?'

'Come along,' said the Doctor chirpily. 'No time to waste.'

Log Entry. Imperial Pride. 26.05.99. 21:33.

This is the last entry of Antonio of Morestra. The great battle is over. We have achieved victory but at terrible cost. Of the eighteen ships that have fought over the Energy Tower, only three remain. The Marne has at last burned up in the planet's atmosphere, after two weeks of drifting. Admiral Oporto never boarded the Tower. He was killed when the ship was rammed by a Church cruiser.

My own ship is paralysed, engines sabotaged in the third attack. We are locked in an inevitable gravity pull towards the sun. My engineers calculate the ship will vaporise in six weeks. Our life support system will fail in two.

My only regret is that we never destroyed the Energy Tower. It has stood like a symbol of death over our empire for twenty centuries. During that time Morestrans have fought each other relentlessly in its name. It is nothing to me but a Tower of Evil Perhaps it is fitting that our empire should die.

I hope this transmission is read some day. Read and understood. These are my last words:

If you have the ability and the will, destroy Torre del Oro. Piece by piece if you have to. Destroy the Tower.

Antonio, regent to the Imperial seat of Morestra, son of the Emperor. Captain of the Imperial Pride.

'It's to do with the dimensional equations. I found them out on the Academy.'

'That's what they wanted from you? Equations?'

They had finished tending to the shocked survivors from the Zeta Minor expedition and were returning with them to the control room. Now, the inevitable questions. Nyssa was having difficulties. How could she explain something she didn't really recall? Almost the only part of it she remembered was crawling out of the lake with the Doctor. Everything else was nothing but a patchwork of images. She barely even recalled disconnecting the defensive shield back on Zeta Major, sneaking on board the shuttle and hiding in the spacesuit.

Her time in the lake was nothing but a dream; a strange, alien experience without reference points. She could see the Doctor – or Doctors, for she had the feeling that the other one was there, the first one she had known. And the Presence, or was that Presences, filtering her mind, bringing out countless

images and memories, fragmenting her being, sifting through Robeson's equations that she had stored inside herself.

'It's difficult to say. It's to do with the reason the Energy Tower doesn't work. You see, to transmit the power collected from planetary movement, the Morestrans planned to open a dimensional rift and funnel it through to its storage batteries. If they didn't use these dimensional openings, the Energy Tower would have had to have been thousands or even millions of kilometres long and physically connected to the storage point. You see?'

'No.'

'Good. But they miscalculated the dimensional integers. Didn't take into account the new parameters. An easy mistake.'

Nyssa stopped at the door to the control room. She indicated to the Morestrans to wait in the corridor. They were still too shocked, perhaps too overawed at actually travelling in the mythical blue box, to do more than nod dumbly and mutter prayers.

'This is all very well, Nyssa, but what are you talking about?'

'You did ask. Although they could open up dimensional rifts, they couldn't stabilise them, couldn't predict how long they would stay open or where they actually went.'

'And that's what that thing in the lake wanted to know?'

'That's what that thing in the lake wanted to know. I think there's some sort of plan to open the dimensional rifts.'

'Why?'

'Ask the Doctor.'

She stepped through to where the Doctor and Kristyan Fall were working at the console. The central rotor was calmly pumping away, taking them back to the Energy Tower.

'Now, you're sure these are the co-ordinates for the control room? The TARDIS isn't known for its pin-point accuracy.'

Fall nodded. 'Though God knows who controls the Tower now.'

The rotor began to slow. 'We're landing.'

Nyssa asked. 'Doctor, what's going to happen?'

The Doctor was still staring at the little square computer, apparently willing the TARDIS to land in the right place. 'Nyssa, I really don't know.'

The rotor stopped.

The Doctor motioned his companions to follow him out. 'It might be a little strange out here. The anti-matter contamination will have got a lot worse. Who knows what it's done to the geography of the Tower.'

Tegan strode forward. 'Doctor, there's one thing I don't understand. Actually, there's lots of things I don't understand, but this one will do for now.'

The Doctor took a deep breath. 'All right, Tegan, just one question.'

'You've been saying all along that there's going to be this big explosion when the anti-matter reacts with the Tower.'

'Yes...'

'So why hasn't it happened? It's been there for months. Why hasn't it gone off already?'

The Doctor's expression changed. To Nyssa, he seemed almost awe-struck. She thought she could help Tegan on this. 'It's because critical mass hasn't been achieved.'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Critical mass was achieved right at the start. The reason nothing has happened is because those who live in the anti-matter universe have been containing it.'

'How can they do that?' Nyssa asked.

'Force of will,' he replied, and Nyssa realised why he had looked so impressed. 'The same way in which they contacted me. Somehow, their concentration has kept the anti-matter contamination stable, at terrible cost to their own universe. Now, we have to restore the balance.' He sighed. 'Because they can't continue any more. I hope you're pleased with yourself, Mr Fall.'

Fall remained impassive. Suddenly, to Nyssa, he looked dangerous again.

'Bring in our guests.'

Nyssa beckoned to the survivors and they sheepishly filed into the control room. Many were averting their eyes from the Doctor.

'Shall we go?' he said pleasantly.

Nyssa activated the doors and they swung open. The Doctor led them out.

They were in the control room of the Energy Tower. It was huge, all chrome and metal staircases. Thousands of computer consoles filled its space; empty swivel chairs waited like ghosts for their operators. There was no one here.

A large, diffused plexi-glass window dominated one wall. Outside, a bright quarter of the anchor planet cast eerie

orange light around the room. The rest was space. And wreckage.

'In the name of the gods,' said Ingham, wonder-struck.

The remains of the two Morestran battle fleets floated in pieces round the Energy Tower.

Ships were crushed together, the gaping holes of a thousand explosions dotting their hulls. Gas plumed steadily from smashed drive sections, flotsam drifted in and out of the tangle of shattered docking equipment.

'So nobody won,' said Kristyan Fall matter of factly. 'They destroyed each other.'

'Quickly now,' said the Doctor to the Morestran survivors. 'Use the escape capsules and get as far away as you can. There must be someone left who can pick you up. Ah, there's operation control.' He indicated a particularly large and complicated wall of technology.

Nyssa was wondering whether her ordeals had done something to her eyes. As the survivors shuffled away, many limping in their cracked and dented armour, they seemed to warp and shimmer, like the perspective in the room was wrong. The more she looked, the worse it seemed to get.

'What's wrong with this place?' asked Tegan, as if reading her mind.

As the survivors left, Nyssa became more and more aware of something else in the control room. It was as if there were two of them, one superimposed on to the other. The second seemed to suggest that there were fleshy creepers and moss growing out of the computers. In the floor space, she had the impression that soft trees were growing out of the deck. The floor itself was no longer smooth; great ditches and mounds dotted its metal surface. It was like a jungle was growing out of the walls. 'Doctor, what am I seeing?' she asked.

He was looking around, presumably observing the same thing. 'I can only guess...physicalisation of will. This is residue, the results of the concentration...entering our universe...becoming matter, organic matter.'

'I've never seen anything like it,' said Tegan breathlessly.

'I have,' said the Doctor. He wasn't smug, or gloating. Rather, it was as if he couldn't believe what he was saying himself. 'The jungle on Zeta Minor. It must be the same thing. So, the planet is quite literally alive.'

'This is all very well,' said Kristyan Fall, 'but hadn't we better get on with it?'

Nyssa noticed that the agent was trembling. His forehead shone with sweat. He kept snapping his head back and forth, as if receiving invisible punches. 'Doctor,' she warned.

'I see it. Mr Fall, you should go with the others.'

Fall smiled. 'Oh no. Not until I've got this stuff out of me.'

Tegan was indignant. 'You can't let him go, Doctor! This is all his fault.'

The Doctor looked at her sadly. 'What do you want me to do?'

Fall was shaking badly now. 'This place, it's making it worse. Come on!'

The Doctor said, 'There is no cure.'

'You're lying.'

'Why should I? I would help you if I could, believe me. The best you can do is find medication to help stabilise the condition. I can help you with –'

'No!' Fall held a revolver in his sweating fingers. 'You will find a cure.'

The Doctor shook his head. He looked towards the operations console. 'All that is left is to get the Tower on-line and open the dimensional rifts.'

'I don't care. This is my Tower and I say what happens.'

Nyssa took a step forward. She halted immediately when the Doctor waved her back. She felt Tegan pressing something into her back.

'All right,' said the Doctor. 'We'll find a way to resolve this. After I get the Tower started up.'

'Touch that button and I'll put a bullet in your brain. And if you change shape, I'll do it again.'

'Why?' asked Nyssa. 'What possible good is this doing you? If we don't open the rift, the reaction will destroy everything.'

Fall allowed himself a moment of triumph. 'Call it...glorious amorality. For now, I control the fate of the universe. Why not let it all go? The whole thing's rotten anyway.'

'That's not for you to decide,' said the Doctor seriously.

'Ah,' said Kristyan Fall, 'but it is. It cured you. Now you can get it to cure me.' He aimed the revolver at the operations console. 'Or I blow the whole thing up.'

'That's enough!' ordered Tegan from behind Nyssa.

Fall sighed, as if disturbed by a wasp. 'You won't shoot,' he said casually. 'You're too good. Besides, I'm the Zero Man. Too fast for you.'

The gun went off right in Nyssa's ear. She flinched, deafened, as Fall fell backwards. As Nyssa clutched her head, she saw the Doctor leap to the operations console. His fists slammed down on the power keys. Immediately, the whole room shuddered into life.

Tegan was running towards Fall, who was rolling away from them, holding his shoulder. For a split second, Nyssa saw the red glare in his eyes.

The computer consoles were chattering and lighting up, disrupting her perception even more. She could hardly see anything clearly, only the Doctor frantically jabbing away at the computer system. 'Nyssa!' he shouted. 'Help me bring the dimensional refractors on-line.'

She staggered through the pulsing jungle, struggling to see the real control room underneath it. She reached the Doctor and saw what he was doing. 'Try and access the procedure, I need to get the collection flow stabilised or the incoming energy will blow the Tower apart.'

Nyssa briefly looked round to see Tegan sprinting across the control room towards a closing door. 'Nyssa!' cried the Doctor desperately and she snapped back to her task.

There was a huge shudder in the infrastructure. She kept her balance and glanced up at the large window. The wrecks and debris outside were swinging away to the left. The whole room vibrated with unbelievable power. The Tower was starting to spin.

Nyssa concentrated on her task. Thanks to her work at the Academy, she was at least familiar with the systems technology. It didn't take her as long as she thought to access the dimensional settings. In front of her, the monitor threw up a deceptively simple-looking spreadsheet. 'Ready to input parameters,' she said.

'This is the tricky bit,' the Doctor replied. 'We have to assume the co-ordinates will be the same as those already preprogrammed. It's up to us to calibrate the resonance frequencies.'

Nyssa nodded. Tricky was the word, all right.

Tegan followed Fall out into the corridors. The 'jungly' effect was more sustained here. She was physically having to negotiate the muddy banks and slippery mosses that seemed to have grown out of the Tower floor. Serpent-like creepers dangled from the ceiling. Whatever she touched, she felt a

curious, unpleasant mixture of metal and organism. She blinked to try and establish some sort of consistency with her field of view.

She didn't know what Fall was up to but knew him too well to think he was just rushing off in a blind panic. He had been right, she couldn't have killed him in the control room. She had wanted to, but something in her, some leveller, wouldn't allow it. Her hands had been shaking so much she had been lucky to hit him at all.

She heard a scurrying noise up ahead and wondered what had happened to all the anti-men the Doctor had told her were here. She was hardly equipped to deal with those creatures.

The spin of the Tower seemed to have stopped. Either that or some sort of compensator had kicked in to make it feel stable. As she picked her way through the corridor, she felt a sudden rush between her feet and what felt like an express train rumbling somewhere deep beneath the floor. The Energy Tower was channelling its power.

More noise, and Tegan, by squinting, could just make out patches of fresh blood on the floor. Fall had to be close by.

The express train moved off into the distance. She felt that time was running out. If only the Doctor had explained why opening these dimensional rifts was so important. She just hoped it wouldn't be dangerous – there was enough excitement in her life as it was.

Ignoring her regret at rushing out impulsively after Fall – instinct again! – Tegan continued her slow journey along the blood trail.

Nyssa punched a key on the console. 'Doctor, I think the rift is opening.'

A series of incredible numbers flashed across the screen in front of her. She could feel the power coursing through the Tower, power generated from the movement of the planet below them.

The Doctor was jury-rigging a security monitor. 'I'll see if we can get a picture. Make sure it's all going smoothly.' At last he stood back and Nyssa saw the monitor reveal an exterior view, somewhere at the top of the Energy Tower.

A series of complex spheres bunched in a circle were firing huge sparks into their centre. What looked like clouds of multicoloured steam were forming where the sparks converged.

‘No doubt about it, this Energy Tower is a fantastic piece of engineering,’ said the Doctor. ‘What a shame that the application should be so wrong.’

Nyssa turned to him. ‘I think it’s about time you told me what’s going to happen. And I don’t want any more evasions.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘Of course, it’s been such a rush. All right. You see –’

A siren blasted out noise from the operations console. A message flashed on to Nyssa’s monitor: *Dimensional nexus established.*

‘I think you’re about to see what’s going to happen,’ remarked the Doctor drily.

Nyssa switched her gaze to the monitor. The sparks were still flying round the central point but the circle itself was black. Blacker than anything Nyssa had ever seen before. It was nothing. Nothing at all.

‘You’ve created a gateway to the universe of anti-matter,’ she said breathlessly. ‘A second black lake.’

The Doctor nodded, full concentration on the monitor. ‘An artificial one,’ he stated vaguely.

‘Are we going in again?’ asked Nyssa, feeling cold dread at the possibility.

‘Not quite,’ replied the Doctor. ‘This time something’s coming out.’

There was movement in the blackness. Something big. Again, Nyssa found it difficult to focus properly on its shifting shape. The angles, once more, were wrong; they sent her eyes around the shape rather than into it. It was moving, out from its home and into this universe. The globes disappeared in the wave of blackness. She saw them for the last time, warped and distorted, looking almost alive.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘That which lives out there. Something beyond our comprehension.’

‘What is it doing to the Energy Tower?’

‘Becoming the Tower. Using its physicality to shape itself in our universe.’ He stood up. ‘*Deus ex machina.*’

Nyssa wondered at his choice of words. ‘What does that mean?’

‘An ancient Earth expression. Literally: “god out of the machine”. It’s a way of handling difficult endings in dramatic fiction. You see, *this* is the end. One way or the other.’

The black wave had now swamped the monitor. 'It will reunite itself with the anti-matter on the Tower. Become whole once more. Then hopefully, thanks to the instability in the dimensional equations, physics will force it back into the rift, which will then close. That was their plan. That was the black wave I kept seeing. They simply needed us to set the whole thing in motion.'

Nyssa started to wonder about the wisdom of allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by a Dark God. 'Shouldn't we leave?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Of course. Where's Tegan?'

'I think she went after Fall.'

'What? Foolish girl! Stay here. Open the TARDIS. I've got to find her.'

Before Nyssa could say anything he threw the key at her and was running to the open exit.

It felt pain but it was growing stronger. It shaped the materials of this corporeal place, agonisingly altered its matter to build itself. The missing fragments were reinstated. Instability rocked its being. It moved faster and faster along the machine, its need to form itself like a mad hunger. It had no thought now, just need. The pain was intensifying. It must be complete soon or all would end. It felt the pull from that part of it that was its home. Time was doing its work. The need grew stronger. And stronger.

Kristyan Fall roared at his reflection.

The thing in the plexi-glass was some half-stage, some mid-transformation. Flaring red eyes beamed out from the remains of his human face. He swung a rippling arm and pounded the plexiglass. The red rage swamped his mind.

For the first time in his life, the Zero Man felt fear. He was lost, he knew it. And there had been so much to do. His shoulder burned with the bullet wound.

'No,' he growled. 'No one beats me.'

The creature in his mind, in his genes, howled for release, swamping his conscious mind. *I am no animal. I am Kristyan Fall. Kristyan Fall. I cannot lose.*

He heard a sound. Snarling, he hauled himself round, fighting, fighting all the time.

Through a red haze of primeval anger he saw the black shadow and a roar that shattered his metamorphosing

eardrums. The shaking of the Tower threw him to the ground. The black mass poured towards him.

He wouldn't let it take him. He would never give in.

Fall stood up, clutching at the last vestiges of his unchanged self. He turned and smashed his fists into the window, already traced with fine white lines. The plexi-glass bent and warped but failed to break. He kept pounding away, feverish and determined.

He turned, some instinct warning the last of his mind. The blackness was on him.

'Doctor,' he shouted, his voice energised by a tremulous animal bass. 'You see! This is my Tower!' screeched Fall. 'I *am* the Tower!' He could no longer hear himself.

Just as the black wave hit, the plexi-glass shattered and something like a great wind commenced pulling him into space.

He saw the stars, the Tower below him. His eyes froze in the cold, condensing the anti-matter that coloured the orbs. Pain flooded his brain.

The wave still had his legs. He felt his body *stretch* in the grip of the two opposing forces. The anti-matter pulled him back into the Tower at incredible speed; the vacuum pulled him out with equal force. Together they ripped Kristyan Fall in half.

Tegan had been thinking about going back, not liking the tremendous funnelling roar that she seemed to be running towards. The Tower rang with thunder, triggering a terrible headache.

The thunder reached a deafening crescendo and Tegan saw the blackness barrelling towards her, a black stain pouring through the corridor like tar.

Tegan turned and ran for her life.

She felt its relentless pace pressing down on her as she pelted back to the control room. How far had she come along this corridor? She ignored the undulating vegetation as she concentrated simply on keeping going. She found herself yelling but could hear nothing in the roar of the wave.

Inevitably, she slipped. However, before she could fall, the Doctor had grabbed her by the shoulder and was pulling her along. The control room door was in sight, just up ahead.

Something was tugging at her mind. Her body was running but she could feel herself being drawn backwards. It was like

she was being split in two. She tried to shut herself out, to concentrate on getting through the door, her head feeling like someone had taken an axe to it. Nothing existed but the door, the blackness and the act of running.

And then, without realising it, she was in the TARDIS.

She was running so hard she hammered into the central console, which knocked her flat. The Doctor was already smashing his hand on to the dematerialisation control. From the floor Tegan saw the rotor start up, agonisingly slowly.

Something crashed into the TARDIS, sending them all sideways. They began to move, caught in a great current that was buffeting them on all sides. The TARDIS began to tip over and Tegan grasped at the console to stop herself falling into a wall.

'Emergency boost!' she heard the Doctor shout, and then her headache got much, much worse.

When she came round, Nyssa and the Doctor were staring at the exterior monitor.

Nyssa was speaking. 'The dimensional rift is destabilising.'

'It worked,' said a very out-of-breath Doctor.

Tegan stood up to see the Energy Tower, now utterly black and pulsing with life. It appeared to be sucking itself away from the anchor planet. There was a huge cloud of dust from the surface and the movement increased.

'Look at the ships,' she said, still stunned, not believing they had escaped.

The ruined Morestran space fleet was being drawn in too. Like some great fishing net, the hissing, lightning-flashed globe at the tip of the Tower was hauling in the wreckage. Smaller particles sped quickly into its midst, while the larger hulls travelled sedately, inexorably into the centre. All the time Tower seemed to be shrinking, folding into itself like a telescope, disappearing slowly into the dark. And then it was all gone, nothing left but the mushroom of dust floating out from the planet's atmosphere.

They stood and watched, unable to register the scene.

At last, the Doctor spoke. 'The Morestran Empire. Scattered to the winds. I suppose at least now they get a new start.'

Tegan's head still rang with the sound of thunder. 'I don't want to hear any more about anti-matter for as long as I live.'

She watched as the Doctor, without replying, walked wearily to a chair and slowly dropped himself on to it. Something was wrong.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

He looked up at her. There was something like humility in his face. ‘I just feel, well...Perhaps this was all my fault, in a way. One glib remark two thousand years ago and look –’ He waved a hand at the monitor.

Nyssa approached him and clasped his shoulder. ‘It wasn’t your fault. The Morestrans built the Tower, they did it to themselves.’

The Doctor nodded but Tegan could see he still was unhappy. ‘Listen,’ she said. ‘One last thing.’

‘Hmm?’

‘I’ve wanted to ask this ever since I found out about it. How *do* you get energy from the kinetic movement of planets? Without spending two thousand years dismantling your empire to build a useless tower, I mean.’

The Doctor grinned, some of the old youth and energy back again. ‘Tegan,’ he said deliberately.

‘Yes, Doctor?’

‘Much as I like you, please. Don’t ask.’

Epilogue

They had been picked up by the patrol vessel *Fermentera*. It had travelled a long way, from the outlying Eta System and had arrived in Omega to witness the last death throes of the Morestran Empire.

Ex-Comms Officer Ingham was hugely relieved to discover that the ship's captain, a gaunt old veteran called Piero, had taken it upon himself to rescue all that he could find, regardless of affiliation. The *Fermentera* was crammed with the shocked survivors of the gigantic space siege.

As their escape pods had just been hauled aboard, the Tower disappeared into the blackness. There was a burst of frantic energy as Piero desperately forced his engines to deny the gravity of the black hole. Ingham could smell the scorching from the hydron tanks even in the outer section.

At last, the engines failed and the captain instigated the emergency landing procedure. Ingham found himself hustled to the bridge and plonked in front of the captain. His mind was ringing with the implications of the horrors he had witnessed. A pious man, his sanity had been stretched by contact with the events both in this system and on Zeta Minor.

He could barely bring himself to think about them.

'I suppose you want to know what happened,' he said, close to tears.

Captain Piero shrugged, his eyes betraying exhaustion. 'What's the point?' he said after a few moments. 'The empire is finished. I think we've had enough of old stories.'

Ingham was surprised but relieved. 'So what are we going to do now?'

Piero's gaze flicked briefly across to the landing stats flashing past on the main viewer.

'Captain?'

Piero stopped. The ship settled on to the surface of Omega Major. Dust from the Tower's departure obscured all vision on the viewer. The crew, a mixture of Church and Imperium, were all waiting for his answer.

Breathing deeply, Captain Piero looked at each of them in turn. 'We start again,' he said.